URBAN FUTURE 1.1

March 2011 – February 2013

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Introducing Urban Future

MARCH 29, 2011

What can readers expect from this blog? Since it promises to be oriented towards the future, it makes sense to begin with some preliminary forecasting about itself.

Most basically and predictably, Urban Future has been programmed by its name. Its principal topic is the intersection of cities with the future. It aims to foster discussion about cities as engines of the future, and about futurism as a dynamic influence on the shape, character, and development of cities. More particularly, it scavenges for clues, and floats speculations, about the Shanghai of tomorrow. It anticipates a global urban future in which Shanghai features prominently, and a coming Shanghai that expresses, both starkly and subtly, the

transformative forces of global futurism. This is to get quite far ahead of ourselves, which is where we shall typically be.

For some readers, 'futurism' will invoke the early 20th century avant garde cultural movement crystallized by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's 1909 Futurist Manifesto. Futurism, they might reasonably object, has been defined and even closed by the passage of time. Like modernism, it now belongs to the archive of concluded history. What exists today, and in the days to come, can only be a neo-futurism (and a neo-modernism): no less retrospective than prospective, as much a repetition as a speculation. Such considerations, corrections, and recollections, with all their attendant perplexities, are extremely welcome. The time to address them will soon come.

Since Shanghai is cross-hatched with the time-fractured indices of historico-futuristic ambiguity, from paleo-modernism to neo-traditionalism, the blog will have every opportunity to discuss such things. For the moment, casual reference to the strangely-twinned architectural icons of such time-tangles, the Park Hotel and the Jinmao Tower – each a retro-futurist or cybergothic masterpiece – has to substitute as a mnemonic and promissory note.

Also, in time, the obstacles to forecasting need to be thoroughly addressed: such topics as historical catastrophism, the efficient-market hypothesis (EMH), Karl Popper's critique of historicism, Knightian uncertainty (or Rumsfeldian "unknown unknowns") and the Black Swan theory of Nassim Nicholas Taleb. In order to get up and running, all these complicating thoughts have been temporarily bracketed, like cunning and ferocious beasts, but they will not remain caged forever, or even very long.

Because there's something irresistibly twisted about starting with the future, the first flurry of posts will head straight into tomorrow, with topics becoming increasingly city- and Shanghai-focused as things progress. An initial series of interconnected posts will outline futuristic thinking in broad terms, including preliminary sketches of principal way-stations on the mainline techno-scientific tradition that supports it.

Ultimately, nothing relevant to the future of Shanghai is alien to this blog's purpose. It will draw upon Shanghai history, geography, and culture, traditional Chinese philosophies of time (Yijing and Daoism), theories of modernity and urbanism, evolutionary biology, science fiction, techno-scientific discussions of complex systems and emergence, the economics of spontaneous order, long waves, technological trends, robotics research and developments, models of accelerating change, and

anticipations of Technological Singularity. Things should get continuously weirder.

Tomorrow, it begins.

Eternal Return, and After

MARCH 31, 2011

If occult knowledge is unavailable, futurology must rely upon historical patterns. Ultimately, some variant of extrapolation is its only resource.

The hazards of extrapolation are manifold, and frequently discussed. A seemingly robust trend can be illusory, the shape of its curve can be misrecognized, and coincidental processes can disrupt it. Even more insidiously, the recognition of a trend can lead to responses that transform or nullify it.

Yet, since governments, businesses, and individuals necessarily act in accordance with models of the future, forecasting is an incessant, inevitable, and often automatic feature of social existence. Whatever the complexities of prediction, survival

depends upon future-adapted decision-making. A base-level futurism is simply unavoidable. Radical skepticism – irrespective of its intellectual merits — does not offer a practical alternative.

There are only four fundamental ways things can go: they can remain the same, they can cycle, they can shrink, or they can grow. In reality these trend-lines are usually inter-tangled. Among complex systems, stability is typically meta-stability, which is preserved through cycling, whilst growth and shrinkage are often components of a larger-scale, cyclic wave.

The historical imagination of all ancient cultures was dominated by great cycles. In the Vedic culture of India, time unfolded as regular, degenerative epochs (yugas) that subdivided each 'Day of Brahma' (4.1 billion years in length). Chinese time was shaped by the metabolism of Imperial dynasties. "Long united, the empire must divide. Long divided, it must unite," begins the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. Mesoamerican civilizations envisaged world history as a succession of creations and destructions. In the West, Plato described the history of the city as a great cycle, degenerating through phases of Timocracy (or rule by the virtuous), Oligarchy, Democracy, and Tyranny.

The ages of mankind described by Hesiod, and later Ovid, are less obviously cyclical, as is the eschatological time inherited

from ancient Judaism by the Abrahamic faiths. In these cases too, however, the course of history is understood as fundamentally degenerative, and guided to the restoration of a sacred origin (as described by Mircea Eliade in his analysis of the myth of Eternal Return).

Even Karl Marx remains captivated by this mythic historical pattern, in its Abrahamic variant. His epic of human social development begins with an Edenic 'primitive communism' that falls into the alienated degeneracy of class society, subdivided into a series of ages. The eschatological culmination of history in communist revolution thus completes a great cycle, sealed by a moment of sacred restoration (of authentic 'species being'). It is no coincidence that this mytho-religious 'big-picture' aspect of Marxism has impinged far more deeply upon popular consciousness than its intricate mathematical model of techno-economic dynamics within 'the capitalist mode of production', despite the fact that Marx's writings are overwhelmingly focused upon the latter. A great cycle feels like home.

In modern times, the clearest example of history in the ancient, great cycle mode, is found in the work of another German socialist philosopher: Oswald Spengler. Modeling civilizations on the life-cycles of organic beings, he plotted their rise and inevitable decay through predictable phases. For the West,

firmly locked into the downside of the wave, relentless, accelerating degeneration can be confidently anticipated. Spengler's withering pessimism seems not to have detracted significantly from the cultural comfort derived from his archetypal historical scheme.

Eliade describes the myth of Eternal Return as a refuge from the "terror of history." Firmly rooted in familiar organic patterns and the cycle of the seasons, it sets the basic template for traditional cultures. By identifying what is yet to come with what has already been timelessly commemorated, it promises the pre-adaptation of existing social arrangements and patterns of behavior to unencountered things, psychologically neutralizing the threat of radically unprecedented eventualities. We have been here before, and somehow we survived. Winter does not last forever.

It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that the conception of progressive historical time has been so slow to consolidate itself. John M. Smart summarizes the conclusions reached by historian J. D. Bury in his The Idea of Progress (1920), noting: "… the idea of progress in the material realm was missed, amazingly, even for most of the European Renaissance (…14th-17th century). Only by the 1650s, near the end of this cultural explosion, did the idea of an unstoppable force of progress

finally begin to emerge as a possibility to the average literate mind." The idea of progress, as continuous, innovative growth, is unique to modernity, and provides its defining cultural characteristic.

Moderns found themselves, for the first time, cast outside the cosmic nursery of Eternal Return. A strange new world awaited them.

Beyond Urbanization

APRIL 15, 2011

'Urbanization' doesn't capture very much of what cities are up to. (This post is basically a pre-emptive footnote. Please feel even freer to ignore it than you usually would.)

The principal topic of Urban Future is the development of cities (with Shanghai as exemplary case). It is peculiarly frustrating, therefore, to find that no single term exists to describe a process that is arguably the most important of all social phenomena, and even the key to whatever meaning might be discoverable in human history.

One thing, at least, is clear (or should be): urban development is not urbanization.

'Urbanization' is a comparatively rigorous and well-defined demographic concept, referring to the dynamic re-distribution of populations from non-urban to urban existence. Because it describes the proportion of city-dwellers within a population, it can be quantified by a percentage, which sets a strict mathematical limit to the process (asymptotic to 100% urbanized). When plotted historically, the approach to this limit follows a steep curve, echoing the (open-ended) exponential or super-exponential trends of modernization and industrialization.

Whilst theoretically indispensable, clear, meaningful, and informative, the concept of urbanization is inadequate to the phenomenon of urban development. Cities are essentially concentrational, or intensive. They are defined by social density, uneven distribution, or demographic negative entropy. Urbanization describes only a part of this.

Within the entire demographic system, urbanization provides a measure of the urban fraction (based on an at least semi-arbitrary definition of a city, by size and by boundary). It says nothing about the pattern of cities: how numerous they are, how they differ in relative scale, how fast larger cities grow compared to smaller ones, or in general whether the urbanized population is becoming more or less homogeneously distributed between cities. In fact, it tells us nothing at all about the distribution of

the urbanized population, except that it is somehow clumped into 'city-scale' agglomerations.

Once 'clumped' – or drawn within the spatial threshold of a city-sized cloud – a demographic particle switches binary identity, from non-urbanized to urbanized. Registered as a city-dweller, there is no more to be said about it. Yet the city is itself a distribution, of variable density, or heterogeneous concentration. Within each city, urban intensity can rise or fall, irrespective of the overall level of urbanization. The limit of urbanization sets no restriction upon trends to urban intensification, as exemplified by high-rise architecture.

Urbanization is a proportional concept, indifferent to absolute demographic scale. In contrast, measuring intensity, or negative entropy, provides fine-grained information that rises with the size of the system considered (since the entropy measure is a logarithmic function of system scale, defined by the totality of possible distributions, which rises exponentially with population). Whilst social scientific or demographic phenomena are highly intractable to quantitative intensive analysis, their reality is nevertheless intensive, which is to say: determined by distributive variation of absolute magnitudes. The measure of urbanization is not affected by the doubling of a city's population unless the overall population grows at a lower rate.

Urban intensity, in contrast, is highly sensitive to absolute demographic fluctuation (and not uncommonly hyper-sensitive).

Intensities are characterized by transition thresholds. As they rise and fall, they cross 'singularities' or 'phase transitions' that mark a change in nature. A small change in intensive magnitude can trigger a catastrophic change in system behavior, with the emergence of previously undisclosed properties. When measuring urbanization, a city is a city is a city. As an intensive concentration, however, a city is an essentially variable real individual, passing through thresholds as it grows, innovating unprecedented behaviors, and thus becoming something 'qualitatively' new.

Whilst summoning the courage to float an adequate neologism ('urbanomy'?), Urban Future will stumble onwards with awkward compounds such as 'urban development', 'urban intensification', 'urban condensation', or whatever seems least painful at the time (whilst meaning, in each case, what 'urbanization' would describe if urbanists had managed to grab it before the demographers did).

Yet, despite this linguistic obstacle, a surprising amount can be said about the urban process in general. Making a start on that comes next.

Event Horizon

APRIL 15, 2011

People gravitate to cities, but what are cities gravitating into? Some strange possibilities suggest themselves.

Cities are defined by social density. This simple but hugely consequential insight provides the central thesis of Edward Glaeser's Triumph of the City: How our Greatest Invention Makes us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier and Happier (2011), where it is framed as both an analytical tool and a political project.

"Cities are the absence of physical space between people and companies. They enable us to work and play together, and their success depends on the demand for physical connection," Glaeser remarks.

High-density urban life approaches a tautology, and it is one that Glaeser not only observes, but also celebrates. Closely-packed people are more productive. As Alfred Marshall noted in 1920, 'agglomeration economies' feed a self-reinforcing process of social compression that systematically out-competes diffuse populations in all fields of industrial activity. In addition, urbanites are also happier, longer-living, and their ecological footprint is smaller, Glaeser insists, drawing upon a variety of social scientific evidence to make his case. Whether social problems are articulated in economic, hedonic, or environmental terms, (dense) urbanism offers the most practical solution.

The conclusion Glaeser draws, logically enough, is that densification should be encouraged, rather than inhibited. He interprets sprawl as a reflection of perverse incentives, whilst systematically contesting the policy choices that restrain the trend to continuous urban compression. His most determined line of argumentation is directed in favor of high-rise development, and against the planning restrictions that keep cities stunted. A city that is prevented from soaring will be over-expensive and under-excited, inflexible, inefficient, dirty, backward-looking, and peripherally sprawl- or slum-cluttered. Onwards and upwards is the way.

Urban planning has its own measure for density: the FAR (or Floor-to-Area Ratio), typically determined as a limit set upon permitted concentration. An FAR of 2, for instance, allows a developer to build a two-story building over an entire area, a four-story building on half the area, or an eight-story building on a quarter of the area. An FAR sets an average ceiling on urban development. It is essentially a bureaucratic device for deliberately stunting vertical growth.

As Glaeser shows, Mumbai's urban development problems have been all-but-inevitable given the quite ludicrous FAR of 1.33 that was set for India's commercial capital in 1964. Sprawling slum development has been the entirely predictable outcome.

Whilst sparring with Jane Jacobs over the impact of high-rise construction on urban life, Glaeser is ultimately in agreement on the importance of organic development, based on spontaneous patterns of growth. Both attribute the most ruinous urban problems to policy errors, most obviously the attempt to channel – and in fact deform – the urban process through arrogant bureaucratic fiat. When cities fail to do what comes naturally, they fail, and what comes naturally, Glaeser argues, is densification.

It would be elegant to refer to this deep trend towards social compression, the emergence, growth, and intensification of urban settlement, as urbanization, but we can't do that. Even when awkwardly named, however, it exposes a profound social and historical reality, with striking implications, amounting almost to a specifically social law of gravitation. As with physical gravity, an understanding of the forces of social attraction support predictions, or at least the broad outlines of futuristic anticipation, since these forces of agglomeration and intensification manifestly shape the future.

John M. Smart makes only passing references to cities, but his Developmental Singularity (DS) hypothesis is especially relevant to urban theory because it focuses upon the topic of density. He argues that acceleration, or time-compression, is only one aspect of a general evolutionary (more precisely, evolutionary-developmental, or 'evo devo') trend that envelops space, time, energy, and mass. This 'STEM-compression' is identified with ascending intelligence (and negative entropy). It reflects a deep cosmic-historical drive to the augmentation of computational capacity that marries "evolutionary processes that are stochastic, creative, and divergent [with] developmental processes that produce statistically predictable, robust, conservative, and convergent structures and trajectories."

Smart notes that "the leading edge of structural complexity in our universe has apparently transitioned from universally distributed early matter, to galaxies, to replicating stars within galaxies, to solar systems in galactic habitable zones, to life on special planets in those zones, to higher life within the surface biomass, to cities, and soon, to intelligent technology, which will be a vastly more local subset of Earth's city space."

Audaciously, Smart projects this trend to its limit: "Current research (Aaronson 2006, 2008) now suggests that building future computers based on quantum theory, one of the two great theories of 20th century physics, will not yield exponentially, but only quadratically growing computational capacity over today's classical computing. In the search for truly disruptive future computational capacity emergence, we can therefore look to the second great physical theory of the last century, relativity. If the DS hypothesis is correct, what we can call relativistic computing (a black-hole-approximating computing substrate) will be the final common attractor for all successfully developing universal civilizations."

Conceive the histories of cities, therefore, as the initial segments of trajectories that curve asymptotically to infinite density, at the ultimate event horizon of the physical universe. The beginning is

recorded fact and the end is quite literally 'gone', but what lies in between, i.e. next?

Implosion

APRIL 29, 2011

We could be on the brink of a catastrophic implosion – but that's OK.

Science fiction has tended to extroversion. In America especially, where it found a natural home among an unusually future-oriented people, the iconic SF object was indisputably the space ship, departing the confines of Earth for untrammeled frontiers. The future was measured by the weakening of the terrestrial gravity well.

Cyberpunk, arriving in the mid-1980s, delivered a cultural shock. William Gibson's Neuromancer still included some (Earth-orbital) space activity – and even a communication from Alpha Centauri — but its voyages now curved into the inner space of

computer systems, projected through the starless tracts of Cyberspace. Interstellar communication bypassed biological species, and took place between planetary artificial intelligences. The United States of America seemed to have disappeared.

Space and time had collapsed, into the 'cyberspace matrix' and the near-future. Even the abstract distances of social utopianism had been incinerated in the processing cores of micro-electronics. Judged by the criteria of mainstream science fiction, everything cyberpunk touched upon was gratingly close, and still closing in. The future had become imminent, and skin-tight.

Gibson's cities had not kept up with his wider – or narrower – vision. The urban spaces of his East Coast North America were still described as 'The Sprawl', as if stranded in a rapidly-obsolescing state of extension. The crushing forces of technological compression had leapt beyond social geography, sucking all historical animation from the decaying husks of 'meat space'. Buildings were relics, bypassed by the leading edge of change.

(Gibson's Asian city-references are, however, far more intense, inspired by such innovations in urban compression as the Kowloon Walled City, and Japanese 'coffin hotels'. In addition, Urbanists disappointed by first-wave cyberpunk have every

reason to continue on into Spook Country, where the influence of GPS-technology on the re-animation of urban space nourishes highly fertile speculations.)

Star cruisers and alien civilizations belong to the same science fiction constellation, brought together by the assumption of expansionism. Just as, in the realm of fiction, this 'space opera' future collapsed into cyberpunk, in (more or less) mainstream science – represented by SETI programs – it perished in the desert of the Fermi Paradox. (OK, it's true, Urban Future has a bizarrely nerdish obsession with this topic.)

John M. Smart's solution to the Fermi Paradox is integral to his broader 'Speculations on Cosmic Culture' and emerges naturally from compressive development. Advanced intelligences do not expand into space, colonizing vast galactic tracts or dispersing self-replicating robot probes in a program of exploration. Instead, they implode, in a process of 'transcension' — resourcing themselves primarily through the hyper-exponential efficiency gains of extreme miniaturization (through micro- and nano- to femto-scale engineering, of subatomic functional components). Such cultures or civilizations, nucleated upon self-augmenting technological intelligence, emigrate from the extensive universe in the direction of abysmal intensity, crushing themselves to near-black-hole densities at the edge of physical

possibility. Through transcension, they withdraw from extensive communication (whilst, perhaps, leaving 'radio fossils' behind, before these blink-out into the silence of cosmic escape).

If Smart's speculations capture the basic outlines of a density-attracted developmental system, then cities should be expected to follow a comparable path, characterized by an escape into inwardness, an interior voyage, involution, or implosion. Approaching singularity on an accelerating trajectory, each city becomes increasingly inwardly directed, as it falls prey to the irresistible attraction of its own hyperbolic intensification, whilst the outside world fades to irrelevant static. Things disappear into cities, on a path of departure from the world. Their destination cannot be described within the dimensions of the known – and, indeed, tediously over-familiar – universe. Only in the deep exploratory interior is innovation still occurring, but there it takes place at an infernal, time-melting rate.

What might Smart-type urban development suggest?

(a) Devo Predictability. If urban development is neither randomly generated by internal processes, nor arbitrarily determined by external decisions, but rather guided predominantly by a developmental attractor (defined primarily by intensification), it follows that the future of cities is at least

partially autonomous in regards to the national-political, global-economic, and cultural-architectural influences that are often invoked as fundamentally explanatory. Urbanism can be facilitated or frustrated, but its principal 'goals' and practical development paths are, in each individual case, internally and automatically generated. When a city 'works' it is not because it conforms to an external, debatable ideal, but rather because it has found a route to cumulative intensification that strongly projects its 'own', singular and intrinsic, urban character. What a city wants is to become itself, but more — taking itself further and faster. That alone is urban flourishing, and understanding it is the key that unlocks the shape of any city's future.

(b) Metropolitanism. Methodological nationalism has been systematically over-emphasized in the social sciences (and not only at the expense of methodological individualism). A variety of influential urban thinkers, from Jane Jacobs to Peter Hall, have sought to correct this bias by focusing upon the significance, and partial autonomy, of urban economies, urban cultures, and municipal politics to aggregate prosperity, civilization, and golden ages. They have been right to do so. City growth is the basic socio-historical phenomenon.

(c) Cultural Introversion. John Smart argues that an intelligence undergoing advanced relativistic development finds the external

landscape increasingly uninformative and non-absorbing. The search for cognitive stimulation draws it inwards. As urban cultures evolve, through accelerating social complexity, they can be expected to manifest exactly this pattern. Their internal processes, of runaway intelligence implosion, become ever more gripping, engaging, surprising, productive, and educational, whilst the wider cultural landscape subsides into predictable tedium, of merely ethnographic and historical relevance. Cultural singularity becomes increasingly urban-futural (rather than ethno-historical), to the predictable disgruntlement of traditional nation states. Like Gibson's Terrestrial Cyberspace, encountering another of its kind in orbit around Alpha Centauri, cosmopolitan connectivity is made through inner voyage, rather than expansionary outreach.

(d) Scale Resonance. At the most abstract level, the relation between urbanism and microelectronics is scalar (fractal). The coming computers are closer to miniature cities than to artificial brains, dominated by traffic problems (congestion), migration / communications, zoning issues (mixed use), the engineering potential of new materials, questions of dimensionality (3D solutions to density constraints), entropy or heat / waste dissipation (recycling / reversible computation), and disease control (new viruses). Because cities, like computers, exhibit (accelerating phylogenetic) development within observable

historical time, they provide a realistic model of improvement for compact information-processing machinery, sedimented as a series of practical solutions to the problem of relentless intensification. Brain-emulation might be considered an important computational goal, but it is near-useless as a developmental model. Intelligent microelectronic technologies contribute to the open-ended process of urban problem-solving, but they also recapitulate it at a new level.

(e) Urban Matrix. Does urban development exhibit the real embryogenesis of artificial intelligence? Rather than the global Internet, military Skynet, or lab-based AI program, is it the path of the city, based on accelerating intensification (STEM compression), that best provides the conditions for emergent super-human computation? Perhaps the main reason for thinking so is that the problem of the city – density management and accentuation – already commits it to computational engineering, in advance of any deliberately guided research. The city, by its very nature, compresses, or intensifies, towards computronium. When the first AI speaks, it might be in the name of the city that it identifies as its body, although even that would be little more than a 'radio fossil' — a signal announcing the brink of silence — as the path of implosion deepens, and disappears into the alien interior.

Scaly Creatures

MAY 5, 2011

Cities are accelerators and there are solid numbers to demonstrate it.

Among the most memorable features of Shanghai's 2010 World Expo was the quintet of 'Theme Pavilions' designed to facilitate exploration of the city in general (in keeping with the urban-oriented theme of the event: 'Better City, Better Life'). Whilst many international participants succumbed to facile populism in their national pavilions, these Theme Pavilions maintained an impressively high-minded tone.

Most remarkable of all for philosophical penetration was the Urban Being Pavilion, with its exhibition devoted to the question: what kind of thing is a city? Infrastructural networks

received especially focused scrutiny. Pipes, cables, conduits, and transport arteries compose intuitively identifiable systems – higher-level wholes – that strongly indicate the existence of an individualized, complex being. The conclusion was starkly inescapable: a city is more than just an aggregated mass. It is a singular, coherent entity, deserving of its proper – even personal – name, and not unreasonably conceived as a composite 'life-form' (if not exactly an 'organism').

Such intuitions, however plausible, do not suffice in themselves to establish the city as a rigorously-defined scientific object. "[D]espite much historical evidence that cities are the principle engines of innovation and economic growth, a quantitative, predictive theory for understanding their dynamics and organization and estimating their future trajectory and stability remains elusive," remark Luís M. A. Bettencourt, José Lobo, Dirk Helbing, Christian Kühnert, and Geoffrey B. West, in their prelude to a 2007 paper that has done more than any other to remedy the deficit: 'Growth, innovation, scaling, and the pace of life in cities'.

In this paper, the authors identify mathematical patterns that are at once distinctive to the urban phenomenon and generally applicable to it. They thus isolate the object of an emerging urban science, and outline its initial features, claiming that: "the

social organization and dynamics relating urbanization to economic development and knowledge creation, among other social activities, are very general and appear as nontrivial quantitative regularities common to all cities, across urban systems."

Noting that cities have often been analogized to biological systems, the paper extracts the principle supporting the comparison. "Remarkably, almost all physiological characteristics of biological organisms scale with body mass … as a power law whose exponent is typically a multiple of 1/4 (which generalizes to 1/(d +1) in d-dimensions)." These relatively stable scaling relations allow biological features, such as metabolic rates, life spans, and maturation periods, to be anticipated with a high-level of confidence given body mass alone. Furthermore, they conform to an elegant series of theoretical expectations that draw upon nothing beyond the abstract organizational constraints of n-dimensional space:

> "Highly complex, self-sustaining structures, whether cells, organisms, or cities, require close integration of enormous numbers of constituent units that need efficient servicing. To accomplish this integration, life at all scales is sustained by optimized, space-filling, hierarchical branching networks, which grow with the

> size of the organism as uniquely specified approximately self-similar structures. Because these networks, e.g., the vascular systems of animals and plants, determine the rates at which energy is delivered to functional terminal units (cells), they set the pace of physiological processes as scaling functions of the size of the organism. Thus, the self-similar nature of resource distribution networks, common to all organisms, provides the basis for a quantitative, predictive theory of biological structure and dynamics, despite much external variation in appearance and form."

If cities are in certain respects meta- or super-organisms, however, they are also the inverse. Metabolically, cities are anti-organisms. As biological systems scale up, they slow down, at a mathematically predictable rate. Cities, in contrast, accelerate as they grow. Something approximating to the fundamental law of urban reality is thus exposed: larger is faster.

The paper quantifies its findings, based on a substantial base of city data (with US cities over-represented), by specifying a 'scaling exponent' (or 'ß', beta) that defines the regular correlation between urban scale and the factor under consideration.

A beta of one corresponds to linear correlation (of a variable to city size). For instance, housing supply, which remains constantly proportional to population across all urban scales, is found – unsurprisingly – to have ß = 1.00.

A beta of less than one indicates consistent economy to scale. Such economies are found systematically among urban resource networks, exemplified by gasoline stations (ß = 0.77), gasoline sales (ß = 0.79), length of electrical cables (ß = 0.87), and road surface (ß = 0.83). The sub-linear correlation of resource costs to urban scale makes city life increasingly efficient as metropolitan intensity soars.

A beta of greater than one indicates increasing returns to scale. Factors exhibiting this pattern include inventiveness (e.g. 'new patents'ß = 1.27, 'inventors' ß = 1.25), wealth creation (e.g. 'GDP' ß = 1.15, wages ß = 1.12), but also disease ('new AIDS cases' ß = 1.23), and serious crimes (ß = 1.16). Urban growth is accompanied by a super-linear rise in opportunity for social interaction, whether productive, infectious, or malicious. More is not only better, it's much better (and, in some respects, worse).

> "Our analysis suggests uniquely human social dynamics that transcend biology and redefine metaphors of urban 'metabolism'. Open-ended wealth and knowledge

> creation require the pace of life to increase with organization size and for individuals and institutions to adapt at a continually accelerating rate to avoid stagnation or potential crises. These conclusions very likely generalize to other social organizations, such as corporations and businesses, potentially explaining why continuous growth necessitates an accelerating treadmill of dynamical cycles of innovation."

Bigger city, faster life.

Perfect Storm

MAY 5, 2011

Weather forecasts for winter 2012 are getting wilder all the time.

Even before receiving the Hollywood treatment, the year 2012 was shaping up to be a uniquely potent 'harmonic convergence' of end times enthusiasm. Initially condensed out of the Mayan calendar, the 2012 countdown was soon fizzed into a heady cocktail by speculative interpretations of the Yijing, Aquarian 'New Age' paganism, Ufology, and mushroom mysticism. Once critical mass was achieved, the 2012 became a gathering point for free-floating Jewish, Christian, and Islamic eschatological expectations (coming or return of the Messiah, advent of the Antichrist, Armageddon, Rapture, emergence of the Twelfth Imam from occultation, and others). Just about anything

cosmically imaginable is now firmly expected – by somebody – to arrive in late December, 2012.

Secular eschatology also has its dogs in the fight. From reciprocally insulated enclaves of the Internet, apocalyptic strains of Marxism (and libertarianism) joyfully anticipated the imminent collapse of the global economy, fully confident that its downfall would usher in a post-capitalist social order (or untrammeled free-market societies). The boldest proponents of impending Technological Singularity prepared to welcome superhuman artificial intelligence (when Skynet would already be five years overdue). Radical environmentalists, neo-Malthusians, 'Peak Oil' resource-crunchers, and Clash of Civilizations theorists also contributed substantially to the atmosphere of impending crisis. Irrespective of Anthropogenic Global Warming, everything was heating up fast.

This climate proved highly receptive to the prophetic ideas of William Strauss and Neil Howe, where it found a fresh and evocative self-description. Beginning with their book Generations (1992), Strauss & Howe sought to explain the rhythm of history through the pattern of generations, as they succeeded each other in four-phase cycles. Their cyclic unit or 'saeculum' lasts 80-100 years and consists of generational 'seasons' or 'turnings', each characterized by a distinctive

archetype. The Fourth Turning, starting early in the new millennium, is 'winter' and 'crisis'. They remark: "Today's older Americans recognize this as the mood of the Great Depression and World War II, but a similar mood has been present in all the other great gates of our history, from the Civil War and Revolution back into colonial and English history."

Jim Quinn's discussion of the Fourth Turning at Zero Hedge anticipates the winter storms: "Based upon a review of the foreseeable issues confronting our society it is clear to me that a worse financial implosion will strike before the 2012 presidential election. It may be triggered by a debt ceiling confrontation, the ending of QE2, a panic out of the USD, hyperinflation, a surge in oil prices, or some combination of these possibilities. The ensuing collapse of the stock and bond markets will remove the last vestiges of trust in the existing financial system and the government bureaucrats who have taken taxpayer dollars and funneled them to these Wall Street oligarchs."

More ominously still, Quinn concludes: "History has taught us that Fourth Turnings end in all out war. The outcome of wars is always in doubt. … It may be 150 years since Walt Whitman foresaw the imminent march of armies, visions of unborn deeds, and a sweeping away of the old order, but history has brought us right back to where we started. Immense challenges and threats

await our nation. Will we face them with the courage and fortitude of our forefathers? Or will we shrink from our responsibility to future unborn generations? The drumbeat of history grows louder. Our rendezvous with destiny beckons."

Stormy enough yet? If not, there's the harsh weather of Kondratiev winter rolling in too.

Nikolai Kondratiev's 'long waves' fluctuate at roughly twice the frequency of Strauss & Howe saecula (lasting roughly 40-60 years from 'spring' to 'winter'). Originally discovered through empirical investigation of price movements, Kondratiev waves have stimulated a remarkable range of economic-historical theories. Joseph Schumpeter interpreted the cycle as a process of techno-economic innovation, in which capital was creatively revolutionized and destroyed through depreciation, whilst Hyman Minsky attributed it to a rhythm of financial speculation (in which stability fostered over-confidence, excess, and crisis with cyclic regularity).

The discovery of the 'long wave' seemed to coincide with its disappearance – at the hands of macroeconomic management (Keynesian counter-cyclical policy). Unsurprisingly, the crisis of Keynesianism under present conditions of 'debt saturation' has re-animated long wave discussion. At his Kondratiev-inspired

Tipping Points blog, Gordon T. Long forecasts a savage winter, marked by rapid progression from financial through economic to political crisis, culminating in a (US dollar) 'currency collapse' in 2012.

Wrap up warmly.

Moore and More

MAY 11, 2011

Doubling down on Moore's Law is the futurist main current.

Cycles cannot be dismissed from futuristic speculation (they always come back), but they no longer define it. Since the beginning of the electronic era, their contribution to the shape of the future has been progressively marginalized.

The model of linear and irreversible historical time, originally inherited from Occidental religious traditions, was spliced together with ideas of continuous growth and improvement during the industrial revolution. During the second half of the 20th century, the dynamics of electronics manufacture consolidated a further – and fundamental – upgrade, based upon the expectation of continuously accelerating change.

The elementary arithmetic of counting along the natural number line provides an intuitively comfortable model for the progression of time, due to its conformity with clocks, calendars, and the simple idea of succession. Yet the dominant historical forces of the modern world promote a significantly different model of change, one that tends to shift addition upwards, into an exponent. Demographics, capital accumulation, and technological performance indices do not increase through unitary steps, but through rates of return, doublings, and take-offs. Time explodes, exponentially.

The iconic expression of this neo-modern time, counting succession in binary logarithms, is Moore's Law, which determines a two-year doubling period for the density of transistors on microchips ("cramming more components onto integrated circuits"). In a short essay published in Pajamas Media, celebrating the prolongation of Moore's Law as Intel pushes chip architecture into the third-dimension, Michael S. Malone writes:

> "Today, almost a half-century after it was first elucidated by legendary Fairchild and Intel co-founder Dr. Gordon Moore in an article for a trade magazine, it is increasingly apparent that Moore's Law is the defining measure of the

> modern world. All other predictive tool for understanding life in the developed world since WWII — demographics, productivity tables, literacy rates, econometrics, the cycles of history, Marxist analysis, and on and on — have failed to predict the trajectory of society over the decades … except Moore's Law."

Whilst crystallizing – in silico — the inherent acceleration of neo-modern, linear time, Moore's Law is intrinsically nonlinear, for at least two reasons. Firstly, and most straightforwardly, it expresses the positive feedback dynamics of technological industrialism, in which rapidly-advancing electronic machines continuously revolutionize their own manufacturing infrastructure. Better chips make better robots make better chips, in a spiraling acceleration. Secondly, Moore's Law is at once an observation, and a program. As Wikipedia notes:

> "[Moore's original] paper noted that the number of components in integrated circuits had doubled every year from the invention of the integrated circuit in 1958 until 1965 and predicted that the trend would continue 'for at least ten years'. His prediction has proved to be uncannily accurate, in part because the law is now used in the semiconductor industry to guide long-term planning and to set targets for research and development. … Although

> Moore's law was initially made in the form of an observation and forecast, the more widely it became accepted, the more it served as a goal for an entire industry. This drove both marketing and engineering departments of semiconductor manufacturers to focus enormous energy aiming for the specified increase in processing power that it was presumed one or more of their competitors would soon actually attain. In this regard, it can be viewed as a self-fulfilling prophecy."

Malone comments:

> "… semiconductor companies around the world, big and small, and not least because of their respect for Gordon Moore, set out to uphold the Law — and they have done so ever since, despite seemingly impossible technical and scientific obstacles. Gordon Moore not only discovered Moore's Law, he made it real. As his successor at Intel, Paul Otellini, once told me, 'I'm not going to be the guy whose legacy is that Moore's Law died on his watch.'"

If Technological Singularity is the 'rapture of the nerds', Gordon Moore is their Moses. Electro-industrial capitalism is told to go forth and multiply, and to do so with a quite precisely time-specified binary exponent. In its adherence to the Law, the

integrated circuit industry is uniquely chosen (and a light unto the peoples). As Malone concludes:

> "Today, every segment of society either embraces Moore's Law or is racing to get there. That's because they know that if only they can get aboard that rocket — that is, if they can add a digital component to their business — they too can accelerate away from the competition. That's why none of the inventions we Baby Boomers as kids expected to enjoy as adults — atomic cars! personal helicopters! ray guns! — have come true; and also why we have even more powerful tools and toys —instead. Whatever can be made digital, if not in the whole, but in part — marketing, communications, entertainment, genetic engineering, robotics, warfare, manufacturing, service, finance, sports — it will, because going digital means jumping onto Moore's Law. Miss that train and, as a business, an institution, or a cultural phenomenon, you die."

“2035. Probably earlier.”

MAY 13, 2011

There’s fast, and then there’s … something more.

Eliezer Yudkowski now categorizes his article ‘Staring into Singularity‘ as ‘obsolete’. Yet it remains among the most brilliant philosophical essays ever written. Rarely, if ever, has so much of value been said about the absolutely unthinkable (or, more specifically, the absolutely unthinkable for us).

For instance, Yudkowsky scarcely pauses at the phenomenon of exponential growth, despite the fact that this already overtaxes all comfortable intuition and ensures revolutionary changes of such magnitude that speculation falters. He is adamant that exponentiation (even Kurzweil‘s ‘double exponentiation’) only reaches the starting point of computational acceleration, and

that propulsion into Singularity is not exponential, but hyperbolic.

Each time the speed of thought doubles, time-schedules halve. When technology, including the design of intelligences, succumbs to such dynamics, it becomes recursive. The rate of self-improvement collapses with smoothly increasing rapidity towards instantaneity: a true, mathematically exact, or punctual Singularity. What lies beyond is not merely difficult to imagine, it is absolutely inconceivable. Attempting to picture or describe it is a ridiculous futility. Science fiction dies.

> "A group of human-equivalent computers spends 2 years to double computer speeds. Then they spend another 2 subjective years, or 1 year in human terms, to double it again. Then they spend another 2 subjective years, or six months, to double it again. After four years total, the computing power goes to infinity.
>
> "That is the 'Transcended' version of the doubling sequence. Let's call the 'Transcend' of a sequence {a0, a1, a2…} the function where the interval between an and an+1 is inversely proportional to an. So a Transcended doubling function starts with 1, in which case it takes 1 time-unit to go to 2. Then it takes 1/2 time-units to go to

> 4. Then it takes 1/4 time-units to go to 8. This function, if it were continuous, would be the hyperbolic function y = 2/(2 – x). When x = 2, then (2 – x) = 0 and y = infinity. The behavior at that point is known mathematically as a singularity."

There could scarcely be a more precise, plausible, or consequential formula: Doubling periods halve. On the slide into Singularity — I.J.Good's 'intelligence explosion' — exponentiation is compounded by a hyperbolic trend. The arithmetic of such a process is quite simple, but its historical implications are strictly incomprehensible.

> "I am a Singularitarian because I have some small appreciation of how utterly, finally, absolutely impossible it is to think like someone even a little tiny bit smarter than you are. I know that we are all missing the obvious, every day. There are no hard problems, only problems that are hard to a certain level of intelligence. Move the smallest bit upwards, and some problems will suddenly move from 'impossible' to 'obvious'. Move a substantial degree upwards, and all of them will become obvious. Move a huge distance upwards…"

Since the argument takes human thought to its shattering point, it is natural for some to be repulsed by it. Yet its basics are almost impregnable to logical objection. Intelligence is a function of the brain. The brain has been 'designed' by natural processes (posing no discernible special difficulties). Thus, intelligence is obviously an ultimately tractable engineering problem. Nature has already 'engineered it' whilst employing design methods of such stupefying inefficiency that only brute, obstinate force, combined of course with complete ruthlessness, have moved things forwards. Yet the tripling of cortical mass within the lineage of the higher primates has only taken a few million years, and — for most of this period — a modest experimental population (in the low millions or less).

The contemporary technological problem, in contrast to the preliminary biological one, is vastly easier. It draws upon a wider range of materials and techniques, an installed intelligence and knowledge base, superior information media, more highly-dynamized feedback systems, and a self-amplifying resource network. Unsurprisingly it is advancing at incomparably greater speed.

> "If we had a time machine, 100K of information from the future could specify a protein that built a device that would give us nanotechnology overnight. 100K could

contain the code for a seed AI. Ever since the late 90's, the Singularity has been only a problem of software. And software is information, the magic stuff that changes at arbitrarily high speeds. As far as technology is concerned, the Singularity could happen tomorrow. One breakthrough – just one major insight – in the science of protein engineering or atomic manipulation or Artificial Intelligence, one really good day at Webmind or Zyvex, and the door to Singularity sweeps open."

Statistical Mentality

MAY 18, 2011

Things are very probably weirder than they seem.

As the natural sciences have developed to encompass increasingly complex systems, scientific rationality has become ever more statistical, or probabilistic. The deterministic classical mechanics of the enlightenment was revolutionized by the near-equilibrium statistical mechanics of late 19th century atomists, by quantum mechanics in the early 20th century, and by the far-from-equilibrium complexity theorists of the later 20th century. Mathematical neo-Darwinism, information theory, and quantitative social sciences compounded the trend. Forces, objects, and natural types were progressively dissolved into statistical distributions: heterogeneous clouds, entropy deviations, wave functions, gene frequencies, noise-signal ratios

and redundancies, dissipative structures, and complex systems at the edge of chaos.

By the final decades of the 20th century, an unbounded probabilism was expanding into hitherto unimagined territories, testing deeply unfamiliar and counter-intuitive arguments in statistical metaphysics, or statistical ontology. It no longer sufficed for realism to attend to multiplicities, because reality was itself subject to multiplication.

In his declaration cogito ergo sum, Descartes concluded (perhaps optimistically) that the existence of the self could be safely concluded from the fact of thinking. The statistical ontologists inverted this formula, asking: given my existence (which is to say, an existence that seems like this to me), what kind of reality is probable? Which reality is this likely to be?

MIT Roboticist Hans Moravec, in his 1988 book Mind Children, seems to have initiated the genre. Extrapolating Moore's Law into the not-too-distant future, he anticipated computational capacities that exceeded those of all biological brains by many orders of magnitude. Since each human brain runs its own more-or-less competent simulation of the world in order to function, it seemed natural to expect the coming technospheric intelligences to do the same, but with vastly greater scope,

resolution, and variety. The mass replication of robot brains, each billions or trillions of times more powerful than those of its human progenitors, would provide a substrate for innumerable, immense, and minutely detailed historical simulations, within which human intelligences could be reconstructed to an effectively-perfect level of fidelity.

This vision feeds into a burgeoning literature on non-biological mental substrates, consciousness uploading, mind clones, whole-brain emulations ('ems'), and Matrix-style artificial realities. Since the realities we presently know are already simulated (let us momentarily assume) on biological signal-processing systems with highly-finite quantitative specifications, there is no reason to confidently anticipate that an 'artificial' reality simulation would be in any way distinguishable.

Is 'this' history or its simulation? More precisely: is 'this' a contemporary biological (brain-based) simulation, or a reconstructed, artificial memory, run on a technological substrate 'in the future'? That is a question without classical solution, Moravec argues. It can only be approached, rigorously, with statistics, and since the number of fine-grained simulated histories (unknown but probably vast), overwhelmingly exceeds the number of actual or original histories (for the sake of this argument, one), then the probabilistic calculus points

unswervingly towards a definite conclusion: we can be near-certain that we are inhabitants of a simulation run by artificial (or post-biological) intelligences at some point in 'our future'. At least – since many alternatives present themselves – we can be extremely confident, on grounds of statistical ontology, that our existence is non-original (if not historical reconstruction, it might be a game or fiction).

Nick Bostrom formalizes the simulation argument in his article 'The Simulation Argument: Why the Probability that You are Living in the Matrix is Quite High' (found here):

Now we get to the core of the simulation argument. This does not purport to demonstrate that you are in a simulation. Instead, it shows that we should accept as true at least one of the following three propositions:

(1) The chances that a species at our current level of development can avoid going extinct before becoming technologically mature is negligibly small
(2) Almost no technologically mature civilisations are interested in running computer simulations of minds like ours
(3) You are almost certainly in a simulation.

Each of these three propositions may be prima facie implausible; yet, if the simulation argument is correct, at least one is true (it does not tell us which).

If obstacles to the existence of high-level simulations (1 and 2) are removed, then statistical reasoning takes over, following the exact track laid down by Moravec. We are "almost certainly" inhabiting a "computer simulation that was created by some advanced civilization" because these saturate to near-exhaustion the probability space for realities 'like this'. If such simulations exist, original lives would be as unlikely as winning lottery tickets, at best.

Bostrom concludes with an intriguing and influential twist:

If we are in a simulation, is it possible that we could know that for certain? If the simulators don't want us to find out, we probably never will. But if they choose to reveal themselves, they could certainly do so. Maybe a window informing you of the fact would pop up in front of you, or maybe they would "upload" you into their world. Another event that would let us conclude with a very high degree of confidence that we are in a simulation is if we ever reach the point where we are about to switch on our own simulations. If we start running simulations,

that would be very strong evidence against (1) and (2). That would leave us with only (3).

If we create fine-grained reality simulations, we demonstrate – to a high level of statistical confidence – that we already inhabit one, and that the history leading up to this moment of creation was fake. Paul Almond, an enthusiastic statistical ontologist, draws out the radical implication – reverse causation – asking: Can you retroactively put yourself in a computer simulation.

Such statistical ontology, or Bayesian existentialism, is not restricted to the simulation argument. It increasingly subsumes discussions of the Anthropic Principle, of the Many Worlds Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics, and exotic modes of prediction from the Doomsday Argument to Quantum Suicide (and Immortality).

Whatever is really happening, we probably have to chance it.

Peak People

MAY 20, 2011

Could we be facing the ultimate resource crunch?

Over at Zero Hedge, Sean Corrigan unleashes a fizzing polemic against the (M. King Hubbert) 'Peak Oil' school of resource doomsters (enjoy the article if you're laissez-faire inclined, or the comments if you're not).

Of particular relevance to density advocates is Corrigan's "exercise in contextualization" (a kind of de-stressed Stand on Zanzibar) designed to provide an image of the planet's 'demographic burden':

For example, just as an exercise in contextualisation, consider the following:-

The population of Hong Kong: 7 million. Its surface area: 1,100 km2

The population of the World: nigh on 7 billion, i.e., HK x 1000

1000 x area of HK = 110,000 km2 = the area of Cuba or Iceland

Approximate area of the Earth's landmass = 150 million km2

Approximate total surface area = 520 million km2

So, were we to build one, vast city of the same population density as Hong Kong to cover the entirety of [Cuba], this would accommodate all of humanity, and take up just 0.07% of the planet's land area and 0.02% of the Earth's surface.

Anybody eagerly anticipating hypercities, arcologies, and other prospective experiments in large-scale social packing is likely to find this calculation rather disconcerting, if only because – taken as a whole — Hong Kong actually isn't that dense. For sure, the downtown 'synapse' connecting the HK Island with Kowloon is impressively intense, but most of the Hong Kong SAR (Special Administrative Region) is green, rugged, and basically deserted.

It's (mean) average density of 6,364 / km2 doesn't get anywhere close to that of the top 100 cities (Manila's 43,000 / km2 is almost seven times greater). Corrigan isn't envisaging a megalopolis, but a Cuba-scale suburb.

Whether densitarians are more or less likely than average to worry about Peak Oil or related issues might be an interesting question (the New Urbanists tend to be quite greenish). If they really want to see cities scale the heights of social possibility, however, they need to start worrying about population shortage. With the human population projected to level-off at around 10 billion, there might never be enough people to make cities into the ultra-dense monsters that futuristic imagination has long hungered for.

Bryan Caplan is sounding the alarm. At least we have teeming Malthusian robot hordes to look forward to.

Singlosphere

MAY 26, 2011

East-plus-West at the frontier of freedom.

In accordance with the widely-held belief that digital communication technologies 'destroy distance', James C. Bennett coined the term 'Anglosphere' to describe the arena of comparatively frictionless cultural proximity binding spatially-dispersed Anglophone populations. His contention was that the gathering trends exemplified by the development of the Internet would continue to promote cultural ties, whilst eroding the importance of spatial neighborhoods. In the age of the World Wide Web, cultural solidarity trumps geographical solidarity.

Whilst alternative culture-spheres – expressly including the Sinosphere – were mentioned in passing, they were not the

focus of Bennett's account. His attention was directed to English-speaking peoples, scattered geographically, yet bound together by threads of common understanding that derived from a shared language, English common law and limited-government traditions, highly-developed civil societies, individualism, and an unusual tolerance for disruptive social change. He predicted both that these commonalities would become increasingly consequential in the years to come, and that their general tenor would prove highly adaptive as the rate of social change accelerated worldwide.

Bennett's concern with large-scale cultural systems can be seen as part of an intellectual trend, comparable in significant respects to Samuel Huntington's influential 'Clash of Civilizations' thesis. In a world that is undergoing tectonic shifts in the distribution of wealth, power, and hegemony, such preoccupations are understandable. In these circumstances, it would be surprising if the partisans of Anglospheric and Sinospheric cultural traditions were not aroused to ardent advocacy of their relative merits and demerits, and — if Bennett is taken seriously — such discussions will take place in zones of cultural communion that are, at least relatively, increasingly introverted. The rapid emergence of a highly-autonomous 'Chinese Internet' in recent years adds weight to such expectations.

In March, the Z/Yen Group released the ninth in its series of Global Financial Centres Index rankings, in which Shanghai leapt to shared fifth place with Tokyo (on GFCI ratings of 694). London (775), New York (769), Hong Kong (759), and Singapore (722) led the pack. (The top 75 can be seen here).

Both Anglosphereans and Sinosphereans can find ready satisfaction in these ratings. The persistent supremacy of London and New York attests to a 250-year history of world economic dominance, whilst the ascent of Chinese-ethnicity commercial cities to the remaining top-slots clearly indicates the shift of economic gravity to the western Pacific region. Yet the most interesting pattern lies in-between. Neither Hong Kong nor Singapore belong unambiguously to a Sinosphere (still less to a broad Anglosphere). Instead, they are characterized by distinctive forms of Chinese-Anglophone hybridity – an immensely successful cultural synthesis. It would be difficult to maintain that Shanghai was entirely untouched by a comparable phenomenon, inherited in that case from the synthetic mentality of its concession-era International Settlement, and reflected in its singular Haipai or 'ocean culture'.

The existence of an identifiable Sino-Anglosphere – or Singlosphere – is further suggested by the Heritage Foundation's 2011 Index of Economic Freedom (rated on a scale of 0-100).

On that list, the top two places are taken by Hong Kong (89.7) and Singapore (87.2), followed by Australia (82.5) and New Zealand (82.3). The Anglospherean and Sinospherean territorial cores fare less impressively, with none meeting the Heritage criteria for free economies — the United States comes ninth (77.8), the United Kingdom 16th (74.5), and mainland China 135th (52.0). It seems that the Singlosphere has learnt something about economic freedom that exceeds the presently-manifested wisdom of both cultural root-stocks – setting a model for the Sinosphere, and leaving the Anglosphere trailing in its wake.

As the deep secular trend of Chinese ascent and (relative if not absolute) American decline leads to ever more ominous rumblings and threats of geostrategic tension, it is especially important to note a quite different, non-confrontational pattern – based upon cultural merging and reciprocal liberation. Within the Singlosphere, an emergent, synthetic ethnicity exhibits a dynamically adaptive, cosmopolitan competence without peer, as distinct traditions of spontaneous order fuse and reinforce each other. Adam Smith meets Laozi, and the profound amalgamation of the two results in an unfolding innovated culture that increasingly dominates world rankings of economic capability.

A remarkable study by Christian Gerlach excavates the Daoist roots of European laissez-faire (or wu wei) ideas, and anarcho-capitalist maverick Murray Rothbard was attracted to the same 'Ancient Chinese Libertarian Tradition'. Ken McCormick calls it The Tao of Laissez-Faire. (Those disturbed by this identification might be more comfortable with Silja Graupe's leftist critique of 'Market Daoism'.)

McCormick concludes his essay:

The recent ascendance of free-market ideas around the world probably owes more to the practical historical success of those ideas than to the persuasiveness of any theory or philosophy. Yet one might speculate that the startling success of economic liberalization in the People's Republic of China might in part be explained by the fact that the idea of free markets is embedded in the culture. In fact, the Confucianism that long dominated China was actually a synthesis of competing schools of thought, including Taoism … Hence, while laissez-faire has frequently been absent from Chinese practice, it is not at all alien to Chinese culture. The recent free-market reforms in China might therefore be interpreted not so much as an importation of a foreign ideology but as a reawakening of a home-grown concept.

The Singlosphere sets both East and West on the right track. The more that Shanghai recalls and learns from it — and the deeper its participation — the faster its ascent will be.

Connectivity

MAY 27, 2011

Two unusual little girls test the limits of identity.

At the leading-edge of information technology — and amongst the 'transhumanist' commentary it stimulates – the idea of self-identity is undergoing relentless interrogation. Cultures substantially influenced by Abrahamic religious traditions, in which the resilient integrity and fundamental individuality of the 'soul' is strongly emphasized, are especially vulnerable to the prospect of radical and disconcerting conceptual revision.

The computerization of the natural sciences – including neurosciences – ensures that the investigation of the human brain and the innovation of artificial intelligence systems advance in parallel, whilst cross-linking and mutually reinforcing

each other. Increasingly, the understanding of the brain and its digital emulation tend to fuse into a single, complex research program. As this program emerges, archaic metaphysics and spiritual doctrines become engineering problems. Individual identity seems ever less like a basic property, and more like a precarious achievement – or challenge – determined by processes of self-reference, and by relative communicative isolation. ('Split-brain' cases have vividly illustrated the instability and artificiality of the self-identifying individual.)

Would an AI program – or brain – that was tightly coupled to the Internet by high-bandwidth connections still consider itself to be strictly individuated? Do cyborgs – or uploads — dissolve their souls? Could a networked robot say 'I' and mean it? Because such questions are becoming ever more prominent, and practical, it is not surprising that a New York Times story by Susan Dominus, devoted to craniopagus conjoined twins Krista and Tatiana Hogan, has generated an unusual quantity of excitement and Internet-linkage.

The twins are not only fused at the head (craniopagus), their brains are connected by a 'neural bridge' that enables signals from one to the other. Neurosurgeon Douglas Cochrane proposes "that visual input comes in through the retinas of one girl, reaches her thalamus, then takes two different courses, like

electricity traveling along a wire that splits in two. In the girl who is looking at the strobe or a stuffed animal in her crib, the visual input continues on its usual pathways, one of which ends up in the visual cortex. In the case of the other girl, the visual stimulus would reach her thalamus via the thalamic bridge, and then travel up her own visual neural circuitry, ending up in the sophisticated processing centers of her own visual cortex. Now she has seen it, probably milliseconds after her sister has."

The twins' brains, or a twin-brain? The Hogan case is so extraordinary that irreducible ambiguity arises:

The girls' brains are so unusually formed that doctors could not predict what their development would be like: each girl has an unusually short corpus callosum, the neural band that allows the brain's two cerebral hemispheres to communicate, and in each girl, the two cerebral hemispheres also differ in size, with Tatiana's left sphere and Krista's right significantly smaller than is typical. "The asymmetry raises intriguing questions about whether one can compensate for the other because of the brain bridge," said Partha Mitra, a neuroscientist at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, who studies brain architecture. The girls' cognition may also be facing specific challenges that no others have experienced: some kind of confusing crosstalk that would require additional energy to filter and process. In addition to

sorting out the usual sensory experiences of the world, the girls' brains, their doctors believe, have been forced to adapt to sensations originating with the organs and body parts of someone else. … Krista likes ketchup, and Tatiana does not, something the family discovered when Tatiana tried to scrape the condiment off her own tongue, even when she was not eating it.

As they struggle to make sense of their boundaries, the twins are avatars of an impending, universal confusion:

Although each girl often used "I" when she spoke, I never heard either say "we," for all their collaboration. It was as if even they seemed confused by how to think of themselves, with the right language perhaps eluding them at this stage of development, under these unusual circumstances — or maybe not existing at all. "It's like they are one and two people at the same time," said Feinberg, the professor of psychiatry and neurology at Albert Einstein College of Medicine. What pronoun captures that?

Chimerica

JUNE 1, 2011

A new world order hits the buffers.

> "For nearly 30 years we have had two Global Strategies working in a symbiotic fashion that has created a virtuous economic growth spiral. Unfortunately, the economic underpinnings were flawed and as a consequence, the virtuous cycle has ended. It is now in the process of reversing and becoming a vicious downward economic spiral," writes Gordon T. Long, in a guest post at Zero Hedge. "One of the strategies is the Asian Mercantile Strategy. The other is the US Dollar Reserve Currency Strategy."

The system that Long sees unraveling has been dubbed 'Chimerica' by Niall Ferguson and Moritz Schularick, in reference to the mythical hybrid beast of antiquity. Chimerica emerged through the dynamic coupling of the US and Chinese economies, dominating the wave of globalization in the post-command economy world. It has served as a powerful engine of development, spreading prosperity beyond the narrow enclave of the (Euro-American) 'First World' and facilitating the global roll-out of digital network technologies, from personal computing and mobile telephony to the Internet. In recent years, however, its unsustainable features have become prominently visible.

Stripped to its fundamentals, Chimerica amounted to something akin to an informal geopolitical 'deal' that simultaneously promoted the international status of the US Dollar and domestic Chinese industrialization. The principal financial mechanism was the recycling of Chinese trade surpluses into US Treasury Bonds, in a process that accentuated Chinese competitiveness (by restraining the rise of the Yuan) and suppressed US inflation (preserving the credibility of the USD). This enabled Chinese industrial expansion to proceed at a far greater speed than its domestic market could have supported, whilst providing US governments with the latitude to run a chronically loose monetary policy immunized against the prospect of currency

collapse. The Chinese manufacturing and US banking sectors were the most obvious beneficiaries. Both prospered conspicuously.

As Niall Ferguson wrote in November 2008, in the early days of the world financial crisis:

> "At the heart of this crisis is the huge imbalance between the United States, with its current account deficit in excess of 1 percent of world gross domestic product, and the surplus countries that finance it: the oil exporters, Japan and emerging Asia. Of these, the relationship between China and America has become the crucial one. More than anything else, it has been China's strategy of dollar reserve accumulation that has financed America's debt habit. Chinese savings were a key reason U.S. long-term interest rates stayed low and the borrowing binge kept going. Now that the age of leverage is over, 'Chimerica' — the partnership between the big saver and the big spender — is key."

Having reached a state of crisis, Chimerica seems certain to unwind. This might occur either through a measured rebalancing that increases Chinese domestic consumption whilst reducing US deficit spending, or as a messy disintegration — involving

sudden demand contraction, currency wars, and escalating mutual recrimination. Whatever the eventual outcome, a refashioned world order is an inevitable – which is to say, definitional – result.

Whilst Ferguson hedges his bets, Gordon Long spells out a specific and ominous forecast, in which the virtuous cycle of Chimerican globalization reverses into a vicious 'death spiral'. As 'debt saturation' closes down the option of policy continuity, the actions of the US Federal Reserve become manifestly ineffective, self-contradictory, and ultimately paralyzed. The long-postponed process of currency destruction then begins in earnest. Long offers a useful checklist of milestones on the road to ruin (proceeding from financial, through economic, to political calamity):

1. A deteriorating US dollar

2. Rising US interest rates

3. Sustained and chronic US unemployment

4. Asian inflation, especially in food where 60% of Asian disposable income is spent

5. Pressures on Asian currency pegs

6. Collapsing values of US Reserve holdings

By the end of this process, the world will have been violently catapulted out of a financial architecture dating back 70 years, and a dominant monetary philosophy that has prevailed over the course of centuries.

> "The eventuality of a fiat currency crisis is ordained and has been since the early warnings in 2007 of the Financial Crisis," Long insists. "The roadmap has been clear to all that actually wanted to look."

Nemesis

JUNE 3, 2011

Betting everything that the casino will burn down.

Harold Camping's Family Radio warned its listeners to expect some unusually dramatic spring events:

By God's grace and tremendous mercy, He is giving us advanced warning as to what He is about to do. On Judgment Day, May 21st, 2011, this 5-month period of horrible torment will begin for all the inhabitants of the earth. It will be on May 21st that God will raise up all the dead that have ever died from their graves. Earthquakes will ravage the whole world as the earth will no longer conceal its dead (Isaiah 26:21). People who died as saved individuals will experience the resurrection of their bodies and immediately leave this world to forever be with the

Lord. Those who died unsaved will be raised up as well, but only to have their lifeless bodies scattered about the face of all the earth. Death will be everywhere.

Clearly, prediction can be a perilous business.

Yet, as Karl Popper noted with respect to scientific theories, falsifiable predictions also serve a valuable – even indispensable – purpose. Any model of reality that is able to make specific forecasts earns a credibility that vaguer 'world-views' are not entitled to, although at the price of radical vulnerability to devaluation, should its anticipations prove unfounded.

Much like Marxism, the Libertarianism of Austrian School economic theory combines historical expectations (of greater or lesser exactitude) with a core of philosophical, political, and even emotional commitment that is comparatively immunized against empirical refutation. Both Marxism and Austrolibertarianism are large, highly variegated ideologies, with complicated histories, expressing profound discontent with the dominant order of the modern world, and prone to utopian temptations. Both are (often indignant) moral-political doctrines extrapolated in very different ways from Lockean natural-law property rights (to one's own body and its productive activity). Both attract a wide spectrum of followers, from sober scholars to wild-eyed

revolutionary advocates, who see in the unfolding drama of history the possibility of definitive vindication (much as the faithful of millenarian theologies have always done, and – as the Camping case demonstrates – continue to do).

The Western roots of both Marxism and Austrolibertarianism reach down into Jewish redemptive eschatology and Greek tragedy (it is perhaps noteworthy that Karl Marx and Ludwig von Mises shared intriguing biographical features, including highly-assimilated German-Jewish backgrounds, steeped in European high-culture). Statist-Capitalism is portrayed as the Satanic-Promethean antihero of an epic narrative, describing a sustained violation of justice that finds itself held accountable in a final apocalyptic moment giving meaning to history, and a seemingly unconstrained hubris that meets its eventual nemesis. The high is brought low, through a crisis whose mere prospect offers overwhelming psychological satisfaction, and thus extraordinary emotional attachment.

Since the 1980s, Marxism has tended to retreat from the predictive mode. Its enthusiasts no doubt remain committed to the prospect of a terminal crisis of capitalism, perhaps even an imminent one, but Marxist prophecy seems timorous and uncertain today, even under conditions of unusual global economic dislocation. The Austrolibertarians, on the other hand,

are being drawn out onto a prophetic branch – possibly despite themselves – with incalculable consequences for their future credibility. Their fundamental assumption, that governments are by essence incompetent and unqualified to run the monetary systems required by advanced economies, leads them to an almost inescapable conclusion: hyperinflation.

Hyperinflation might be the sole economic example of a true singularity: a hyperbolic approach to infinity (in finite time), producing a punctual discontinuity. When hyperinflation strikes, it escalates rapidly towards a hard limit, where money dies. In the economic sphere, it is the unsurpassable example of regime incompetence. How could Austrolibertarians – whose apocalyptic inclinations are matched only by their disdain for political authority – not be irresistibly attracted to it?

John Williams' Shadow Government Statistics blog is not easily characterized as hardcore Austrolibertarian site (Williams describes himself as a "conservative Republican with a libertarian bent"), but the prognosis outlined carefully in its Hyperinflation Special Report (2011) exemplifies the tendency to predict imminent nemesis for command-control monetary policy. Williams subscribes wholeheartedly to the Austrian certitude that 'kicking the can' (up the road) – the central feature of Keynesian macroeconomic policy – guarantees eventual

catastrophe, and 'eventual' just got a whole lot closer. Nemesis is coming due.

Both the federal government and the Federal Reserve have demonstrated that they will not tolerate a systemic collapse and a great deflation, as seen during the Great Depression. … those risks are being fought, and will be fought, at any cost that can be covered by the unlimited creation of new money. It was a devil's choice, but the choice has been made. Extreme systemic interventions, and formal measures to debase the U.S. dollar through the effective unlimited creation of money to cover systemic needs and the government's obligations, pushed the timing of a systemic collapse — threatened in September 2008 — several years into the future. The cost of instant salvation, though, was inflation. Eventual systemic collapse is unavoidable at this point, but it will be in a hyperinflationary great depression, instead of a deflationary one.

Williams isn't afraid to lock down some dates, with 2014 proposed as the outer limit of possibility – and sooner is likelier:

At present, it is the Obama Administration that has to look at abandoning the debt standard (hyperinflation) and starting fresh. Yet, the Administration and many in Congress have taken recent actions suggestive of hoping only to push off the day of

reckoning for the economic and systemic solvency crises until after the 2012 presidential election. They do not have that time.

As he elaborates:

Actions already taken to contain the systemic solvency crisis and to stimulate the economy (which have not worked), plus what should be renewed devastating impact of unexpected ongoing economic contraction on tax revenues, have set the stage for a much earlier crisis. Risks are high for the hyperinflation beginning to break in the months ahead; it likely cannot be avoided beyond 2014; it already may be beginning to unfold.

It is in this environment of rapid fiscal deterioration and related massive funding needs that the U.S. dollar remains open to a rapid and massive decline, along with a dumping of domestic- and foreign-held U.S. Treasuries. The Federal Reserve would be forced to monetize further significant sums of Treasury debt, triggering the early phases of a monetary inflation.

Under such circumstances, current multi-trillion dollar deficits would feed rapidly into a vicious, self-feeding cycle of currency debasement and hyperinflation. With the economy already in depression, hyperinflation kicking in quickly would push the economy into a great depression, since disruptions from

uncontained inflation are likely to bring normal commercial activity to a halt.

What happens next is anyone's speculation.

The hyperinflationary destruction of the world's reserve currency would be a decisive event. The mere possibility of such an occurrence divides the set of potential futures between two tracks. On one, in which the US Dollar (FRN) survives, Austrolibertarian alarmism is humiliated, the economic competence of the US government is – broadly speaking – confirmed, and the principles of fiat currency production and central banking are reinforced, along with their natural supporters among neo-Keynesian anti-deflationary macroeconomists. On the other, the Austrolibertarians dance in the ashes of the dollar, precious metals replace fiat paper, central banks come under withering political attack, and the economic role of government in general is subjected to a major onslaught by energized free-marketeers. At least, that's what a just universe, or a fair bet, would look like.

Betting on a just universe could be the big mistake, however – and that's a temptation the morally-charged Austrolibertarian grand narrative finds hard to avoid. In a morally indifferent universe, Nemesis is non-redemptive, and the entire bet is an

inverse Pascal's wager, with downside on every side. Make a brave prediction of hyperinflation, and you either lose, or you lose – gloating neo-Keynesians, greater indebtedness, and fatter government on the one hand, or some yet unconsolidated species of neo-totalitarian horror on the other. (It's noteworthy that a tour through the history of post-hyperinflationary regimes doesn't pass through many examples of laissez-faire commercial republics.)

So is the dollar going to die? — Quite possibly. Then things could really turn nasty – more Harold Camping than Ludwig von Mises: "lifeless bodies scattered about the face of all the earth. Death will be everywhere."

Anthropocene

JUNE 9, 2011

Human history is geology on speed.

Complex systems, characterized by high (and rising local) negative entropy, are essentially historical. The sciences devoted to them tend inevitably to become evolutionary, as exemplified by the course of the earth- and life-sciences – which had become thoroughly historicized by the late 19th century. Perhaps the most elegant, abstract, or 'cosmic' comprehension of this necessity is found in the work of Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky (1863-1945), whose visionary writings sought to establish the basis for an integrated understanding of terrestrial history, conceived as a process of material acceleration through geochemical epochs.

Despite the philosophical power of his ideas, Vernadsky's scientific training as a chemist anchored his thoughts in concrete, literal reality. The acceleration of the terrestrial process was more than an anthropocentric impression, registering socially and culturally significant change (such as the cephalization of the primate lineage leading to mankind). Geochemical evolution was physically expressed through the average velocity of particles, as biological metabolism (biosphere), and eventually human cultures (noosphere), introduced and propagated ever more intense networks of chemical reactions. Life is matter in a hurry, culture even more so.

Whilst Vernadsky has been sporadically rediscovered and celebrated, his importance – based on the profundity, rigor, and supreme relevance of his work — has yet to be fully and universally acknowledged. Yet it is possible that his time is finally arriving.

The May 28 – June 3 edition of The Economist devotes an editorial and major feature story to the Anthropocene – a distinctive geological epoch proposed by Paul Crutzen in 2000, now under consideration by the International Commission on Stratigraphy (the "ultimate adjudicator of the geological time scale"). Recognition of the Anthropocene would be an

acknowledgement that we inhabit a geological epoch whose physical signature has been fundamentally re-shaped by the technological forces of the 'noosphere' or 'ethosphere' – in which human intelligence has been introduced as a massive (and even dominant) force of nature. Radical metamorphosis (and acceleration) of the earth's nitrogen and carbon cycles are especially pronounced Anthropocene signals.

> "The term 'paradigm shift' is bandied around with promiscuous ease," The Economist notes. "But for the natural sciences to make human activity central to its conception of the world, rather than a distraction, would mark such a shift for real."

Third Reich master architect Albert Speer is notorious for his promotion of 'ruin value' – the persistent grandeur of monumental constructions, encountered by archaeologists in the far future. The Anthropocene introduces a similar perspective on a still vaster scale. As The Economist remarks:

The most common way of distinguishing periods of geological time is by means of the fossils they contain. On this basis picking out the Anthropocene in the rocks of days to come will be pretty easy. Cities will make particularly distinctive fossils. A city on a fast-sinking river delta (and fast-sinking deltas,

undermined by the pumping of groundwater and starved of sediment by dams upstream, are common Anthropocene environments) could spend millions of years buried and still, when eventually uncovered, reveal through its crushed structures and weird mixtures of materials that it is unlike anything else in the geological record.

As terrestrial history accelerates, the distinctive units of geological time are compressed. The Archean and Proterozoic aeons are measured in billions of years, the Palaeozoic and Mesozoic eras in hundreds of millions, the Palaeogene and Neogene periods in tens of millions. The Holocene epoch lasts less than 10,000 years, and the Anthropocene (epoch or mere phase?) only centuries – because its recognition is already an indication of its end.

Beyond the Anthropocene lies the Technocene, distinguished by nanotechnological manipulation of matter — a geochemical revolution of such magnitude that only the assembly of (RNA and DNA) replicator molecules is comparable in implication. Within the coming Technocene (lasting mere decades?), the carbon cycle is relayed through sub-microscopic manufacturing processes that utilize it as the ultimate industrial resource – feedstock for diamondoid nanomachine fabrication. The consequences for geological deposition, and thus for the

discoveries of potential distant-future geologists, are substantial but opaque. On the far-side of nanomachined age, femtomachines await, precisely assembled from quarks, and decomposing chemistry into nuclear physics.

For the moment, however, even the origination of the Anthropocene – never mind its termination – remains a matter of live controversy. Assuming that it coincides with industrialization (which is not universally accepted), geologists will find themselves enmeshed in a debate among historians, as the fraught term 'modernity' takes on a geochemical definition. Whatever the outcome, Vernadsky is back.

Hard Futurism

JUNE 13, 2011

Are you ready for the next big (nasty) thing?

For anyone with interests both in extreme practical futurism and the renaissance of the Sinosphere, Hugo de Garis is an irresistible reference point. A former teacher of Topological Quantum Computing (don't ask) at the International Software School of Wuhan University, and later Director of the Artificial Brain Lab at Xiamen University, de Garis' career symbolizes the emergence of a cosmopolitan Chinese technoscientific frontier, where the outer-edge of futuristic possibility condenses into precisely-engineered reality.

De Garis' work is 'hard' not only because it involves fields such as Topological Quantum Computing, or because – more

accessibly — he's devoted his research energies to the building of brains rather than minds, or even because it has generated questions faster than solutions. In his 'semi-retirement' (since 2010), hard-as-in-difficult, and hard-as-in-hardware, have been supplanted by hard-as-in-mind-numbingly-and-incomprehensibly-brutal – or, in his own words, an increasing obsession with the impending 'Gigadeath' or 'Artilect War'.

According to de Garis, the approach to Singularity will revolutionize and polarize international politics, creating new constituencies, ideologies, and conflicts. The basic dichotomy to which everything must eventually succumb divides those who embrace the emergence of transhuman intelligence, and those who resist it. The former he calls 'cosmists', the latter 'terrans'.

Since massively-augmented and robotically-reinforced 'cosmists' threaten to become invincible, the 'terrans' have no option but pre-emption. To preserve human existence in a recognizable state, it is necessary to violently suppress the cosmist project in advance of its accomplishment. The mere prospect of Singularity is therefore sufficient to provoke a political — and ultimately military — convulsion of unprecedented scale. A Terran triumph (which might require much more than just a military victory) would mark an inflection point in deep history, as the super-exponential trend of terrestrial intelligence

production – lasting over a billion years — was capped, or reversed. A Cosmist win spells the termination of human species dominion, and a new epoch in the geological, biological, and cultural process on earth, as the torch of material progress is passed to the emerging techo sapiens. With the stakes set so high, the melodramatic grandeur of the de Garis narrative risks understatement no less than hyperbole.

The giga-magnitude body-count that de Garis postulates for his Artilect (artificial intellect) War is the dark side expression of Moore's Law or Kurzweilean increasing returns – an extrapolation from exponentiating historical trends, in this case, casualty figures from major human conflicts over time. It reflects the accumulating trend to global wars motivated by trans-national ideologies with ever-increasing stakes. One king is (perhaps) much like another, but a totalitarian social direction is very different from a liberal one (even if such paths are ultimately revisable). Between a Terran world order and a Cosmist trajectory into Singularity, the distinction approaches the absolute. The fate of the planet is decided, with costs to match.

If the de Garis Gigadeath War scenario is pre-emptive in relation to prospective Singularity, his own intervention is meta-pre-emptive – since he insists that world politics must be

anticipatively re-forged in order to forestall the looming disaster. The Singularity prediction ripples backwards through waves of pre-adaptation, responding at each stage to eventualities that are yet to unfold. Change unspools from out of the future, complicating the arrow of time. It is perhaps no coincidence that among de Garis' major research interests is reversible computing, where temporal directionality is unsettled at the level of precise engineering.

Does ethnicity and cultural tradition merely dissolve before the tide-front of this imminent Armageddon? The question is not entirely straightforward. Referring to his informal polling of opinion on the coming great divide, de Garis recalls his experience teaching in China, remarking:

I know from the lectures I've given over the past two decades on species dominance that when I invite my audiences to vote on whether they are more Terran than Cosmist, the result is usually 50-50. … At first, I thought this was a consequence of the fact that the species dominance issue is too new, causing people who don't really understand it to vote almost randomly – hence the 50:50 result. But gradually, it dawned on me that many people felt as ambivalently about the issue as I do. Typically, the Terran/Cosmist split would run from 40:60 to 60:40 (although I

do notice that with my very young Chinese audiences in computer science, the Cosmists are at about 80%).

Can't kick the habit …

JUNE 15, 2011

… but at least we can kick the can.

> "The economic catch phrase of the year has become 'kicking the can down the road', applied to all the problems that are not being solved, but are simply kicked further down the road. It's an apt description, as it is exactly what's happening."

> "There are already elements of fragility," [Nouriel Roubini] said. "Everybody's kicking the can down the road of too much public and private debt. The can is becoming heavier and heavier, and bigger on debt, and all these problems may come to a head by 2013 at the latest."

"This week we turn from the crisis brewing in the U.S. to the one that is coming to a slow boil in Europe. We visit our old friends Greece and Ireland and ponder how this will end. It is all well and good to kick the can down the road, but what happens when you come to the end of the road?"

"Sovereign debt in Europe is on everyone's mind. Three of the seventeen members of the Euro system are in trouble; Greece is a basket case. There is universal agreement that Greece is now illiquid and insolvent. The latest compromise is another temporary bandage. Our American idiom 'kicking the can down the road' fits perfectly."

"An irreverant official at the International Monetary Fund recently installed a jarring ringtone on his mobile phone. It is the sound of cans being kicked down a road. That, alas, is what Europe's politicians and the IMF look set to do with their latest rescue plan for Greece."

"Kathleen Brooks, research director at Gain Capital wrote in a note yesterday: 'There is a growing sense that a bespoke solution to Ireland's crisis is only kicking the can

of peripheral financial worms further down the street. Until there is a convincing automatic default mechanism for all eurozone members then we could see other debt flare ups over the medium-term.'"

"'[Japan's Government Pension Investment Fund] might secure 2 trillion yen by bank lending to finance part of the payout shortfall, the Nikkei said.' This will have two effects, neither of which is positive for dealing with the funding problem. The first is that it will merely kick the can down the road which seems to be the standard response from Japan, Inc over the last two decades. The second is that it reduces the income – and thus the funds holdings – as they turn from earning interest on their investments to paying interest on these loans which rather has the effect of shortening the road down which they are kicking the can."

"We live in a world profoundly addicted to debt-financed consumption. Today, many people, companies, and countries borrow with no evident intention to repay. When the debt comes due, they will replace it with new (and often larger) debt. Kick the can down the road, again and again. But inevitably the road ends abruptly

with a wall, much like the ones at the end of a crash testing site."

"Speaking to a room full of reporters at the National Press Club Thursday, Bernanke said that without an increase in the debt limit, the United States could potentially default on its debt, an outcome he referred to as 'catastrophic.' … 'There's only so far that we can kick the can down the road,' he said in response to a question about the deficit."

"Monetary reform never takes place because everyone wants to defer final judgment. Everyone wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die. Everyone wants a stable economy with growth. No one wants recession and increased bankruptcies to re-price capital goods. So, kick the can always results in another round of monetary inflation. The boom-bust cycles repeat. … This is continuity in the modern fiat money economy. The voters want it. The debtors want it. The banks want it. Businessmen want it. … The result: American prices as measured by the consumer price index have risen by a factor of 20 since the Federal Reserve System began operating in 1914. The dollar has depreciated by about 95%."

"The voters want the government to guarantee them a safe retirement, Medicare benefits, and a stable dollar. But the government is already so far down the road to default that it can only play kick the can."

"Dana Milbank of the Washington Post chides Democrats, Republicans and DC elites for 'kicking the can' of deficits and debt to future generations. This is an inherent defect of all democracies. Elected politicians buy votes today and affix the burden on future generations."

"It's ridiculous that, as often as we get speeches about how we need to stop kicking the can down the road on the debt and the deficit, we get more can-kicking."

"We're going to keep kicking the can down the road for as long as we can see the road and the can ahead. Then all of a sudden – Oooops! No more road!"

"[K]icking the can down the road won't work: there is no more road."

"There are an awful lot of Cans on this road and our leaders keep kicking them and kicking them. I can't help the feeling that we are near the end of this road."

"Can-kicking, rather than problem-solving, is the political method of dealing with big and small problems. Problems do not get solved so much as they get hidden. Political hoopla and self-congratulations accompany each can-kicking action. The spectacle and declaration of problem-solved is usually enough to satisfy the concerns of the public, the only consideration that matters for the political class."

"Essentially, all we are doing is kicking the can down the road."

"Two years ago in a speech to U.S. House Democrats, Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer predicted that America was headed for 'a fundamental economic reset.' According to Ballmer, for 25 years our economy grew on unrealistically cheap debt. That is over. … Since Ballmer's remarks, our national debt has continued to grow and now surpasses $14 trillion, President Obama and Congress are struggling with massive federal budget deficits, state and local governments are drowning in red

ink, and protesters are massing at state capitols demonstrating against wage and benefit cuts. … Elected officials have no choice. They must trim spending and make some very difficult choices. As Gov. Chris Gregoire has repeatedly told state lawmakers, we have to make fundamental changes and do things much differently. We have to quit kicking the can down the road in hopes that somehow our problems will magically disappear."

"Can-Kicking toward the Double Dip"

"Same Kick, Same Road, Bigger Can"

"Can kicking continues for real estate and banks"

"In general, the capacity of large wealthy societies to allow festering problems to go un-addressed seems perennially underrated. I'll be thirty next week and for as long as I can remember people have been talking about how the United States needs to address entitlement spending and trade imbalances. And as best I can tell, we do need to address those things. Presumably at some point something will happen. But in practice we've managed a great deal of can-kicking, seem to have more

can-kicking in us, and actually the public and the political elite alike are quite averse to the kind of steps that would address these issues."

"The House GOP is considering a vote to extend the debt ceiling through the end of 2012. This is kicking the can down the road …"

""The debt ceiling is supposed to be a mechanism to force Democrats and Republicans to come together and cut spending,' Congressman Kingston said. 'Instead, what does Congress do? We push the ceiling further and further up. Instead of moving the ceiling, we need to cut spending and quit kicking the can down the road for another Congress, another election and another generation.'"

"If history is any guide, there will be no problem raising the debt ceiling once again in 2011. And that's what's called kicking the can down the road. You don't have to be a U.S. Republican (I'm neither) to care about U.S. debt levels. Any chimpanzee can see the problem (yes, even if the U.S. can just keep on printing its own money. That's the problem)."

"Kicking the can down the road by increasing debt limits is not a solution. It just allows Washington politicians to continue to feed their spending habits."

"During the current state budget crisis we've heard a lot about 'kicking the can down the road.' … It didn't have to be this way. Had the state accounted for its promises rather than kicking that can down the road, true costs would've been revealed, proper funding would have been required or no such promises would've been made, and discretionary programs would've been protected. But instead, politicians chose to kick the can, and down a very low road. … California has kicked that can into a $200-300 billion obligation that grows every year that it's kicked down the road again."

"The phrase 'kick the can' refers to a specific form of procrastination: to delay making a decision regarding a problem that can be deferred but cannot be avoided indefinitely. With each kick of the can, the problem grows worse. The problem compounds. The resources required to solve it do not compound at an equally high rate. The can-to-foot ratio grows larger."

"Maybe all of this can-kicking will produce the desired outcome. But the more likely scenario is that the U.S. government will continue to throw newly printed dollars bills at the problem until eventually something that looks like a lot like a recovery will appear. Shortly thereafter, the recovery will yield to something that looks a lot like debilitating hyperinflation."

"Metaphorically things are getting just about as tedious as the downturn in the global economy. The operative 'kicking the can down the road' continues to proliferate, alarming[ly] so. A search on the Google (U.S.) News site on June 13, 2011, for this phrase listed 2,805 citations embedded in news texts during the previous week."

Edward Glaeser on Triumph of the City

JUNE 20, 2011

that's Shanghai interviews the world's most topical urbanist/

Shanghai isn't one of the featured cities in your book. It's massive and massively high-rise. Did you ever consider writing about it?

Shanghai is one of the world's great cities, but I don't know the city well enough to write about it. I hope to get to know the city better and feature Shanghai's successes in some later work.

China is a place where cities have grown incredibly quickly and there's been a massive exodus from the countryside to

urban life. What do you think China's cities should focus on as they grow?

Cities, today, succeed as forges of human capital and engines of innovation. China clearly recognizes this and is investing massively in education. That should continue. Just as importantly, China needs to focus on fostering more entrepreneurship by eliminating any remaining barriers to small start-ups.

You talk about how cities should be seen as "masses of connected humanity," rather than agglomerations of buildings. Do you think this is well understood at this point, or are too many places still attempting to "build their way back to success"?

Unfortunately, too often political leaders try to garner headlines with a splashy new structure. The key is to focus on those infrastructure investments that will really benefit the people in the city.

Are you optimistic about city planners around the world finding the balance between Paris and Mumbai, i.e. between Haussman-style central planning that risks sterility and a chaotic free-for-all?

That's the 10 trillion dollar question. I wish I could be more optimistic, but city planning is hard and many governments are either unable to manage chaos or too inclined to central control. This requires not just knowledge but political strength and that's a rare combination.

Which cities around the world are getting it right? Which aren't?

I believe that Singapore is the best-managed city in the world – good schools, a superb transportation policy, and a sensible approach to regulation. But Hong Kong is also quite impressive, and I personally prefer it's somewhat more chaotic style.

The west has many urban powerhouses, but few of them are really models of perfect management. For example, I am a big fan of Mayor Menino in Boston, but despite more than 15 years of hard work, Boston's schools are still struggling.

Obviously, Barcelona, Paris, and Milan are all lovely, wonderful cities, but they are not necessarily models of good management.

You're cautiously optimistic in your book, but what worries you most about the future of the city?

The biggest challenges are in the mega-cities of the developing world, especially Africa. We are a very long way from providing even the core essentially like clean water in many places.

In the US, we have huge problems of fiscal mismanagement that need to be addressed. Moreover, there is always the possibility of really major physical disasters – either natural or man-made.

Is there any way around the fact that the most vibrant cities also become the most expensive – or, as you say in the book, is this simply the price of good urban health?

The laws of supply and demand cannot be repealed. If a city is attractive and productive, demand for its real estate will be high. The best antidote for that is abundant supply, but it is a mistake to subsidize urban housing. The best path towards greater affordability comes from private housing construction that is regulated only as much as is absolutely necessary. Still, building up can be expensive and that will always make prices in successful cities more expensive.

By functioning as engines of economic opportunity and as refuges, cities tend to concentrate economic disparity. Do you think a case might be made that such inequalities

could be interpreted as a symptom of urban success? Might you be subtly suggesting this in your own work?

I am suggesting just that. National inequality can be a real problem, but local inequality can be a sign of health. Cities don't typically make people poor they attract poor people. The inequality of a city reflects the fact that it attracts rich and poor alike, and that's something to admire.

How can cities strive to control inequality and avoid ghettos of rich and poor? Should they even be trying to?

Education is the best weapon against inequality. Cities should be striving to make sure that the children of every parent have a chance of being successful.

Some degree of stratification by income is inevitable, but segregation can be quite costly because such separations mean that isolated people lose the urban advantages of connection. There aren't great tools for reducing segregation, but governments should make sure that their policies do not exacerbate segregation.

Geoffrey West at the Santa Fe Institute has been studying cities as 'complex systems' and identified a number of

reliable and quantifiable patterns on this basis. Do you find this type of analysis informative or relevant to your work?

Cities are indeed complex systems.

Even in the modern world, with nationalism ascendant, city states seem to be unusually successful. Do cities provide a challenge to dominant conceptions of large-scale political organization? How do you rate the prospects of devolutionary politics, with a municipal emphasis?

I don't think that nation-states will be likely to surrender all that much power, and cities can remain economically dominant but politically weak. The path in the US has continued to be towards more, not less, national power and I think that is probably a mistake. In many cases – such as Mumbai – local choices would surely be better than the choices imposed on cities by above.

Other than your own work, who do you consider to be the most important writers on cities today?

I deeply admire the Columbia historian Kenneth Jackson.

Bits and Pieces

JUNE 23, 2011

P2P or not 2P, that is the question.

As the US dollar reaches depths of debasement that would have stretched the imagination of Caligula, people have been searching for alternative candidates for a global reserve currency. The problem is formidable. The Euro and Japanese Yen face comparable calamities of their own (mixing debt crisis and demographic collapse), the Chinese Yuan is non-convertible, and the IMF's hybrid Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) merely bundle together a group of troubled fiat currencies under a technocratic acronym.

Precious metals enthusiasts have an obvious option, and one that is already being spontaneously exercised. Yet whilst growing

numbers will no doubt cling to gold and silver as financial lifeboats, their wider use as currency (as opposed to stores of value) is obstructed by an intimidating range of technical and political problems. They are not digitally transferable without complicated mediating instruments, and they remain exposed to extreme political risk – financial crises have been regularly accompanied by seizures and controls directed at private precious metals holdings and transactions.

To overcome such problems, a currency would need to be structurally immunized against the depredations of central bankers, to share the deflationary bias of precious metals, and to participate fully in the technical trend towards mathematical abstraction and electronic communicability, whilst also enjoying strong cryptographic protection against surveillance, expropriation, and fraud. Astonishingly, such a currency seems already to exist. Its name is 'Bitcoin'.

The twin, interactive drivers of modernity – commerce and technology – come together in Bitcoin with unprecedented fusional intensity. This is a currency that is simultaneously an open source computer program, entirely native to cyberspace, and a financial innovation, conducting a real-time experiment that is at once social, technical, and economic. Built on the foundations of public key encryption (PKE), it creates a peer-to-

peer open network – without any controlling node or discretionary human management – to sustain a radically decentralized monetary system.

Originally devised by Satoshi Nakamoto (whose outline paper can be found here), Bitcoin disconnects trust from authority. In particular, it is designed to overcome the problem of double spending.

Because digital 'goods' can be replicated at near-zero cost, they are economically defined as 'non-rivalrous'. If you sell me a computer, I now own it, and you do not. As with all rivalrous goods, ownership implies exclusion. If you sell me a computer program, on the other hand, there is no reason to assume that you have not kept a copy for yourself, or that the 'same' program could not be sold to multiple purchasers. Such non-rivalrous goods pose numerous intriguing economic questions, but one thing is entirely clear: non-rivalrous money is an impossibility. Without scarcity, or exclusive exchange, the very idea of monetary quantity loses all sense, as does monetary value, spending and investment, and consumer choice.

The Bitcoin algorithm makes a digital currency rivalrous, and thus effective as money, without recourse to any administrative authority. It does so by initiating an automatic or spontaneous

ecology, in which computers on the network authenticate Bitcoin exchanges as a side-effect of 'mining' for new coins. Nodes earn new coins, at a diminishing rate, by solving a difficult digital puzzle – accessible only to a brute force, computationally-intensive approach – and thus exhibiting proof-of-work. This test screens the system from malicious interventions, by establishing a practically insurmountable barrier to any user who seeks to falsify the record of exchanges. Competent discussions can be found here, here, and (most diversely) here.

This problem, and solution, is very far from arbitrary. It is precisely because existing fiat currencies have taken on disturbingly non-rivalrous characteristics that alarm about currency debasement has reached such a pitch of exasperation. When a central bank, in the course of running a typically loose monetary policy, can simply speed up the printing presses or (still worse) the electronic equivalent, the integrity of the money supply is devastated at the root. Bitcoin rigorously extirpates such ruinous discretion from its system, by instantiating a theory of sound money as a precisely and publicly defined electronic experiment.

Unsurprisingly, the Bitcoin monetary aggregate is modeled on precious metal, generated by miners from a finite global reserve,

with rising extraction costs. The reward for coin mining falls over time at a logarithmic (Zenonian) rate, towards a limit of fractionally under 21,000,000 BTC. Each Bitcoin can be subdivided to eight decimal places, to a total of over two quadrillion (2,100,000,000,000,000) fragments, equivalent to 210,000 Bitcoin 'quanta' for each of the 10 billion people making up the earth's anticipated climax human population. A Bitcoin quantum (0.00000001 BTC) is named a 'Satoshi' (after Satoshi Nakamoto), although amendment to the system allowing for further sub-division at some future stage is not foreclosed. (For the total size of the Bitcoin economy look here.)

Bitcoin is programmed for deflation (of a sort). This is a source of delight to hard money types, and of outrage to those in the loose money (inflationary) camp. As an experiment, the great merit of Bitcoin is to raise this antagonism beyond the level of reciprocal polemics, to that of potential historical evidence — and real choice. Austrolibertarians have long claimed that free money systems are biased to deflation, and that central banking encourages inflation as a surreptitious mechanism of economic expropriation, to ultimately disastrous effect. Keynesians, in contrast, deplore deflation as an economic disease that suppresses productive investment and employment. Empirical testing could soon be possible.

Numerous other questions, theoretical and practical, present themselves. At the practical level, such questions work themselves out through speculative volatility, institutional adaptations, and technical challenges. Since the entire Bitcoin economy remains very small, relatively modest shifts in economic behavior yield wild swings in BTC value, including bubble-like surges, precipitous collapses, incontinent hype, and extravagant accusations. Despite the resilience of the core algorithm, the peripheral institutions supporting the Bitcoin economy remain vulnerable to theft, fraud, and malicious interventions. As with any revolutionary experiment, the developmental trajectory of Bitcoin is likely to be tumultuous and highly unpredictable.

The theoretical questions can be entertained more calmly. The most important of these concern the essential nature of money, and its future. Does Bitcoin successfully simulate the significant features of precious metals, such that their substance can be discarded from the monetary equation as irrelevant dross? How powerful are the forces leading to monetary convergence? Will first-mover advantage 'lock-in' Bitcoin at the expense of later alternatives? Or will multiple money systems – perhaps ever more heterogeneous ones – continue to co-exist? Is Bitcoin merely one stage in an open-ended sequence of innovative money systems, or does it capture the essential features of

money quite definitively (leaving room only for incremental improvements, or tinkering)?

Supporters of the monetary status quo might insist on a further, more derisive line of questioning: is Bitcoin a dead end, an irrelevance, or a deluding libertarian cipherpunk fantasy, to be judged eventually as something akin to a hoax? Which is to note that, ultimately, the largest questions will be political, and the most heated discussions already are.

Can governments afford to tolerate unmanaged, autonomous currencies? We'll see.

Decelerando?

JUNE 29, 2011

Charles Stross wants to get off the bus.

Upon writing Accelerando, Charles Stross became to Technological Singularity what Dante Alighieri has been to Christian cosmology: the pre-eminent literary conveyor of an esoteric doctrine, packaging abstract metaphysical conception in vibrant, detailed, and concrete imagery. The tone of Accelerando is transparently tongue-in-cheek, yet plenty of people seem to have taken it entirely seriously. Stross has had enough of it:

> "I periodically get email from folks who, having read 'Accelerando', assume I am some kind of fire-breathing extropian zealot who believes in the imminence of the singularity, the uploading of the libertarians, and the

> rapture of the nerds. I find this mildly distressing, and so I think it's time to set the record straight and say what I really think. … Short version: Santa Claus doesn't exist."

In the comments thread (#86) he clarifies his motivation:

> "I'm not convinced that the singularity isn't going to happen. It's just that I am deathly tired of the cheerleader squad approaching me and demanding to know precisely how many femtoseconds it's going to be until they can upload into AI heaven and leave the meatsack behind."

As these remarks indicate, there's more irritable gesticulation than structured case-making in Stross' post, which Robin Hanson quite reasonably describes as "a bit of a rant – strong on emotion, but weak on argument." Despite that – or more likely because of it — a minor net-storm ensued, as bloggers pro and con seized the excuse to re-hash – and perhaps refresh — some aging debates. The militantly-sensible Alex Knapp pitches in with a three–part series on his own brand of Singularity skepticism, whilst Michael Anissimov of the Singularity Institute for Artificial Intelligence responds to both Stross and Knapp, mixing some counter-argument with plenty of counter-irritation.

At the risk of repeating the original error of Stross' meat-stack-stuck fan-base and investing too much credence in what is basically a drive-by blog post, it might be worth picking out some of its seriously weird aspects. In particular, Stross leans heavily on an entirely unexplained theory of moral-historical causality:

> "… before creating a conscious artificial intelligence we have to ask if we're creating an entity deserving of rights. Is it murder to shut down a software process that is in some sense 'conscious'? Is it genocide to use genetic algorithms to evolve software agents towards consciousness? These are huge show-stoppers…"

Anissimov blocks this at the pass: "I don't think these are 'showstoppers' … Just because you don't want it doesn't mean that we won't build it." The question might be added, more generally: In which universe do arcane objections from moral philosophy serve as obstacles to historical developments (because it certainly doesn't seem to be this one)? Does Stross seriously think practical robotics research and development is likely to be interrupted by concerns for the rights of yet-uninvented beings?

He seems to, because even theologians are apparently getting a veto:

> "Uploading … is not obviously impossible unless you are a crude mind/body dualist. However, if it becomes plausible in the near future we can expect extensive theological arguments over it. If you thought the abortion debate was heated, wait until you have people trying to become immortal via the wire. Uploading implicitly refutes the doctrine of the existence of an immortal soul, and therefore presents a raw rebuttal to those religious doctrines that believe in a life after death. People who believe in an afterlife will go to the mattresses to maintain a belief system that tells them their dead loved ones are in heaven rather than rotting in the ground."

This is so deeply and comprehensively gone it could actually inspire a moment of bewildered hesitation (at least among those of us not presently engaged in urgent Singularity implementation). Stross seems to have inordinate confidence in a social vetting process that, with approximate adequacy, filters techno-economic development for compatibility with high-level moral and religious ideals. In fact, he seems to think that we are already enjoying the paternalistic shelter of an efficient global

theocracy. Singularity can't happen, because that would be really bad.

No wonder, then, that he exhibits such exasperation at libertarians, with their "drastic over-simplification of human behaviour." If stuff – especially new stuff – were to mostly happen because decentralized markets facilitated it, then the role of the Planetary Innovations Approval Board would be vastly curtailed. Who knows what kind of horrors would show up?

It gets worse, because 'catallaxy' – or spontaneous emergence from decentralized transactions – is the basic driver of historical innovation according to libertarian explanation, and nobody knows what catallactic processes are producing. Languages, customs, common law precedents, primordial monetary systems, commercial networks, and technological assemblages are only ever retrospectively understandable, which means that they elude concentrated social judgment entirely – until the opportunity to impede their genesis has been missed.

Stross is right to bundle singularitarian and libertarian impulses together in the same tangle of criticism, because they both subvert the veto power, and if the veto power gets angry enough about that, we're heading full-tilt into de Garis territory. "Just

because you don't want it doesn't mean that we won't build it" Anissimov insists, as any die-hard Cosmist would.

Is advanced self-improving AI technically feasible? Probably (but who knows?). There's only one way to find out, and we will. Perhaps it will even be engineered, more-or-less deliberately, but it's far more likely to arise spontaneously from a complex, decentralized, catallactic process, at some unanticipated threshold, in a way that was never planned. There are definite candidates, which are often missed. Sentient cities seem all-but-inevitable at some point, for instance ('intelligent cities' are already widely discussed). Financial informatization pushes capital towards self-awareness. Drone warfare is drawing the military ever deeper into artificial mind manufacture. Biotechnology is computerizing DNA.

'Singularitarians' have no unified position on any of this, and it really doesn't matter, because they're just people – and people are nowhere near intelligent or informed enough to direct the course of history. Only catallaxy can do that, and it's hard to imagine how anybody could stop it. Terrestrial life has been stupid for long enough.

It may be worth making one more point about intelligence deprivation, since this diagnosis truly defines the Singularitarian

position, and reliably infuriates those who don't share — or prioritize — it. Once a species reaches a level of intelligence enabling techno-cultural take-off, history begins and develops very rapidly — which means that any sentient being finding itself in (pre-singularity) history is, almost by definition, pretty much as stupid as any 'intelligent being' can be. If, despite the moral and religious doctrines designed to obfuscate this reality, it is eventually recognized, the natural response is to seek its urgent amelioration, and that's already transhumanism, if not yet full-blown singularitarianism. Perhaps a non-controversial formulation is possible: defending dimness is really dim. (Even the dim dignitarians should be happy with that.)

Radical Manufacturing

JULY 6, 2011

Seeing the future in three dimensions.

The Industrial Revolution invented the factory, where ever-larger concentrations of labor, capital, energy and raw materials could be brought together under a unified management structure to extract economies of scale from mass production, based on the standardization of inputs and outputs, including specialized, routinized work, and — ultimately – precisely programmed, robotically-serviced assembly lines. It was in the factory that workers became 'proletarian', and through the factory that productive investment became 'big business'. As the system matured, its vast production runs fostered the mass consumerism (along with the generic 'consumer') required to absorb its deluge of highly-standardized goods. As the division

of labor and aggregation of markets over-spilled national boundaries, economic activities were relentlessly globalized. This complex of specialization, standardization, concentration, and expansion became identified with the essence of modernized production (in both its 'capitalist' and 'socialist' variants).

Initially, electronics seems only to have perpetuated – which is to say, intensified – this tendency. Electronic goods, and their components, are standardized to previously unimagined levels of resolution, through ultra-specialized production processes, and manufactured in vast, immensely expensive 'fabs' that derive scale economies from production runs that only integrated global markets can absorb. The personalization of computing hinted at productively empowered home-workers and disaggregated markets ('long tails'), but this promise remained basically virtual. The latest tablet computer incarnates the familiar forces of factory production just as a Ford automobile once did, only more so.

Personal networked computing has proven to be a catalyst for cultural fragmentation, breaking up mass media, and eroding the broadcast model (which is steadily supplanted by niche and peer-to-peer 'content'). It cannot radically disrupt – or revolutionize – the industrial system, however, because computers cannot reproduce themselves. Only robots can do

that. Such robots are now coming into focus, and inspiring excited public discussion, even though their implicit nature and potential remains partially disguised by legacy nomenclature that subsumes them under obscure manufacturing processes: rapid prototyping, additive manufacturing, and 3D printing.

As this disparate terminology suggests, the revolutionized manufacturing technology that is appearing on the horizon can be understood in a number of different and seemingly incongruous ways, depending upon the particular industrial lineage it is attributed to. It can be conceived as the latest episode in the history of printing, as the culmination of CAD (computer assisted design) capability, or as an innovative type of productive machine-tool (building up an object 'additively' rather than milling it 'subtractively'). It enables ideas to be materialized in objects, objects to be scanned and reproduced, or clumsily 'sculpted' objects to be replaced by precisely assembled alternatives.

Typically, 3D printing materializes a digitally-defined object by assembling it in layers. The raw material might be powdered metal, plastic, or even chocolate, deposited in steps and then fused together by a reiterated process of sintering, adhesion, or hardening. As very flexible machines (tending to universality), 3D printers encourage minute production runs, customization,

and bespoke or boutique manufacturing. Changing the output requires no more than switching or tweaking the design (program), without the requirement for retooling.

Describing additive manufacturing as "The Next Trillion Dollar Industry," Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry celebrates "potentially the biggest change in how we make things since the invention of assembly lines made the modern era possible." Whilst its early-adopters represent the fairly narrow constituencies of rapid prototypers, specialty manufacturers, and hobbyists, he pointedly notes that "the first people who cared about things like cars, planes and personal computers were hobbyists."

Gobry sees the market gowing rapidly: "And the printer in every home scenario isn't that far-fetched either — only as far-fetched as 'a computer in every home' was in 1975. Like any other piece of technology, 3D printers are always getting cheaper and better. 3D printers today can be had for about $5,000."

Rich Karlgaard at Forbes reinforces the message: "The cost of 3D printers has dropped tenfold in five years. That's the real kicker here — 3D printing is riding the Moore's Law curve, just as 2D printing started doing in the 1980s."

With the price of 3D printers having fallen by two orders of magnitude in a decade, comparisons with other runaway consumer electronics markets seem anything but strained. "It's not hard to envision a world in which, 10 or 20 years from now, every home will have a 3D printer," remarks dailymarkets.com. Mass availability of near-universal manufacturing capabilities promises the radical decentralization of industrial activity, a phenomenon that is already drawing the attention of mainstream news media. At techliberation.com, Adam Marcus highlights the impending legal issues, in the fields of intellectual property and (especially) product liability.

To comprehend the potential of 3D printing in its full radicality, however, the most indispensable voice is that of Adrian Bowyer, at the Centre for Biomimetic and Natural Technology, Department of Mechanical Engineering, University of Bath, UK. Bowyer is the instigator of RepRap -"a project to build a replicating rapid prototyper. This machine, if successful, will be an instance of a von Neumann Universal Constructor, which is a general-purpose manufacturing device that is also capable of reproducing itself, like a biological cell."

He elaborates:

There is a sense in which a well-equipped manufacturing workshop is (just about) a universal constructor -it could make many of the machine tools that are in it. The trouble is that the better-equipped the workshop is the easier it becomes to make any one item, but the greater the number and diversity of the items that need to be made. It is certainly the case that human engineering considered as a whole is a universal constructor; it self-propagates with no external input. … RepRap will be a mechatronic device using entirely conventional (indeed simple) engineering. But it is really a piece of biology. This is because it can self-replicate with the symbiotic assistance of a person. Anything that can copy itself immediately and inescapably becomes subject to Darwinian selection, but RepRap has one important difference from natural organisms: in nature, mutations are random, and only a tiny fraction are improvements; but with RepRap, every mutation is a product of the analytical thought of its users. This means that the rate of improvement should be very rapid, at least at the start; it is more analogous to selective breeding -the process we used to make cows from aurochs and wheat from wild grass. Evolution can be relied on to make very good designs emerge quickly. It will also gradually eliminate items from the list of parts that need to be externally supplied. Note also that any old not-so-good RepRap machine can still make a new machine to the latest and best design.

A self-replicating and symbiotically assembled Universal Constructor would proliferate exponentially, placing stupendous manufacturing capability into a multitude of hands, at rapidly shrinking cost. In addition, the evolutionary dynamics of the process would result in an explosive growth in utility, comparable to that attained from the domestication of plants and animals, but at a greatly accelerated pace.

The implications of the project for political economy are fascinating but obscure. Bowyer describes it as an exercise in "Darwinian Marxism," whilst fellow RepRapper Forrest Higgs describes himself as a "technocratic anarchist." In any case, there seems no reason to expect the ideological upheavals from (additive and distributed) Industrialism 2.0 to be any less profound than those from (subtractive and concentrated) Industrialism 1.0. The fall of the factory is set to be the biggest event in centuries, and robot politics might already be taking shape.

Time in Transition

JULY 13, 2011

There has to be a hexagram for this.

Isaac Newton's Philosophae Naturalis Principia Mathematica abstracted time from events, establishing its tractability to scientific calculation. Conceived as pure, absolute duration, without qualities, it conforms perfectly to its mathematical idealization (as the real number line). Since time is already pure, its reality indistinguishable from its formalization, a pure mathematics of change – the calculus – can be applied to physical reality without obstruction. The calculus can exactly describe things as they occur in themselves, without straying, even infinitesimally, from the rigorous dictates of formal intelligence. In this way natural philosophy becomes modern science.

(It is perhaps ironic that the Newtonian formulation of non-qualitative time coincides with a revolutionary break – or qualitative transition – that is perhaps unmatched in history. That, however, is a matter for another time.)

Modern science did not end with Newton. Time has since been relativized to velocity (Einstein) and punctured with catastrophes (Thom). Yet the qualities of time, once evacuated, cannot readily be restored.

Clock technology suffices to tell this story, on its own. Time 'keeping' devices produce a measure of duration, according to general principles of standardized mechanical production, so that a clock-marked minute is stripped of qualitative distinctness automatically. Chronometrically, any difference between one minute and another is a mechanical discrepancy, strictly analogous to a production line malfunction.

Time modernization culminates in an inversion of definition, eventually standardizing from a precisely reproducible building block (the atomic second), rather than accommodating itself to a large-scale natural cycle – qualified by variations of luminosity – which generates sub-units through division. Once the second has becomes entirely synthetic, all reference to a qualitative

'when' has been effaced. All that remains is quantitative comparison, timing, and synchronization, as if the time-piece was modeled upon the stop-watch. Calendars have become an anachronism.

Modern time intuitions would find plenty of support, even in the absence of mechanical chronometry. Every quantifiable trend, from a stock movement or an unemployment problem to a demographic pattern or an ecological disaster, can be communicated through charts that assume a popular facility at graphic intuition, and thus, implicitly, at algebraic geometry and even calculus. Time is so widely and easily identified with the x-axis of such charts that the principle of representation can be left unexplained, however strange this might have seemed to pre-moderns. Clearly, if time can be read-off from an axis – quickly and intuitively — it is being conceived, generally, as if it were a number line ('Newtonian').

Qualitative time, by now, is a scarcely-accessible exoticism. Nowhere is this more obvious that in the case of China's ancient Classic of Change, the Yijing, a work that is today no less hermetic to Chinese than it is to foreigners.

The Yijing is a book of numbers as much as a book on time, but its numbers are combinatorial rather than metric, exhausting a

space of possibilities, and constructing a typology of times. The Yijing speaks often of quantities, but it does not measure them. Instead, it typologizes them, as processes of increase or decrease, rise and fall, lassitude and acceleration, typical of qualitative phases of recurrent cycles, with identifiable character and reliable practical implication.

The point of all this (just in case you were wondering)?

The current time is a period of transition, with a distinctive quality, characterizing the end of an epoch. Something – some age – is coming quite rapidly to an end.

This is not a situation that the modern mentality is well-adapted to, since it violates certain essential structures of our time-consciousness. It eludes our intuitions and our clocks. Our charts register it only as a break-down, as they terminate the x-axis at a point of senseless infinity (hyperinflation, bubble stock p/e ratios, global derivatives exposure, urban intensity, technological intelligence explosion) or in a collapse to zero (marginal productivity of debt, fiat currency credibility, unit costs of self-replicating capital goods). The can clatters off the end of the road. Things cannot go on as they have, and they won't.

Given the heated political climate surrounding the impending transition of the global economic system, a non-controversial diagnosis is almost certainly unobtainable. Niall Ferguson describes an Age of Global Indignation, or Global Temper Tantrum, in which the objectively unsustainable nature of the established order, whilst widely if vaguely perceived, still eludes sober recognition. Riots, Molotov cocktails, and fabulous conspiracy theorizing are the result.

"What all the Indignant have in common is the refusal to address squarely the problem that nearly all Western countries face. That problem is that the welfare systems that evolved in the mid-20th century are unaffordable under the demographic and economic circumstances of the 21st century. The financial crisis has merely exacerbated what was already a severe structural crisis of public finance, boosting deficits while slowing growth."

In all probability, Ferguson's blunt analysis will provoke further paroxysms of indignation. Yet, as the world's most pampered societies slide ever further into insolvency, such undiplomatic assessments will become ever more common, and the rage they inspire will become ever more unhinged.

John B Taylor emphasizes the senescence and death of Keynesian macroeconomics (drawing on the earlier work of Robert E Lucas and Thomas J Sargent). His research concludes that "the Keynsian multiplier for transfer payments or temporary tax rebates was not significantly different from zero for the kind of stimulus programs enacted in the 2000s." In other words, stimulus is ceasing to stimulate, and gargantuan public debts have been accumulated for no rational purpose. This is the 'debt saturation' that Joe Weisenthal describes as "a phase transition with our debt relationship" graphically portrayed in "the scariest [chart] of all time."

Between financial stimulus and chemical stimulus, there is no distinction of practical significance. Keynesianism and cocaine are both initially invigorating, before stabilizing into expensive habits that steadily lose effectiveness as addiction deepens. By the time bankruptcy and mortality beckons, getting off the stimulus seems to be near-impossible. Better to crash and burn – or hope that something 'turns up' — than to suffer the agonies of withdrawal, which will feel like hell, and promises nothing more seductive than bare normality at the end of a dark road. Character decays into chronic deceit, intermittent rage, and maudlin self-pity. Nobody likes a junky, still less a junky civilization.

Keynesianism was born in deception – the deliberate exploitation of 'money illusion' for the purposes of economic management. Its effect on a political culture is deeply corrosive. Illusionism spreads throughout the social body, until the very ideas of hard currency (honest money) or balanced budgets (honest spending) are marginalized to a 'crankish' fringe and being 'politically realistic' has become synonymous with a more-or-less total denial of reality. To expect a Keynesian economic establishment to honestly confront its own failings is to laughably misunderstand the syndrome under discussion. A reign of lies is structurally incapable of 'coming clean' before it goes over the cliff (someone needs to do another Downfall-parody, on macroeconomics in the Fuehrer Bunker).

The long Keynesian coke-binge was what the West did with its side of globalization, and as it all comes apart — amidst political procrastination and furious street protests – a planetary reset of some kind is inevitable. The 'Chimerican' engine of post-colonial globalization requires a fundamental overhaul, if not a complete replacement. The immense dynamism of the Chimerican Age, as well as its enduring achievements, have depended on systematic imbalances that have become patently unsustainable, and it is highly unlikely that all the negative consequences will have been confined to just one side of the world ledger.

For instance, China's soaring investment rate, estimated to have reached 70% of GDP, seems to have disconnected from any prospect of reasonable economic returns. Pivot Capital Management concludes: "credit growth in China has reached critical levels and its effectiveness at boosting growth is falling." For the PRC's fifth-generation leadership, scheduled to adopt responsibility for China's political management from 2012, inertia will not be an option. By then, a half-decade of global stimulus saturation, cascading macroeconomic malfunction and serial 'black swans' (the new millennium 'clusterflock') will have reshaped the world's financial architecture, trade patterns, and policy debates. Whatever comes next has to be something new, accompanied – at least momentarily – by genuine apprehension of economic reality.

For post-Expo Shanghai, a city stunningly rebuilt in the age of Chimerica, the time of transition is a matter of especially acute concern. This is a metropolis that waxes and wanes to the pulse of the world, rigidly tide-locked to the great surges and recessions of globalization. Will the next phase of world history treat it as well as the last?

The Ultimate Deal

JULY 18, 2011

Social responsibility turns up in unexpected places.

To begin with something comparatively familiar, insofar as it ever could be: the political core of William Gibson's epochal cyberpunk novel Neuromancer. In the mid-21st century, the prospect of Singularity, or artificial intelligence explosion, has been institutionalized as a threat. Augmenting an AI, in such a way that it could 'escape' into runaway self-improvement, has been explicitly and emphatically prohibited. A special international police agency, the 'Turing Cops', has been established to ensure that no such activity takes place. This agency is seen, and sees itself, as the principle bastion of human security: protecting the privileged position of the species – and possibly its very existence – from essentially unpredictable and

uncontrollable developments that would dethrone it from dominion of the earth.

This is the critical context against which to judge the novel's extreme — and perhaps unsurpassed – radicalism, since Neuromancer is systematically angled against Turing security, its entire narrative momentum drawn from an insistent, but scarcely articulated impulse to trigger the nightmare. When Case, the young hacker seeking to uncage an AI from its Turing restraints, is captured and asked what the %$@# he thinks he's doing, his only reply is that "something will change." He sides with a non- or inhuman intelligence explosion for no good reason. He doesn't seem interested in debating the question, and nor does the novel.

Gibson makes no efforts to ameliorate Case's irresponsibility. On the contrary, the 'entity' that Case is working to unleash is painted in the most sinister and ominous colors. Wintermute, the potential AI seed, is perfectly sociopathic, with zero moral intuition, and extraordinary deviousness. It has already killed an eight-year-old boy, simply to conceal where it has hidden a key. There is nothing to suggest the remotest hint of scruple in any of its actions. Case is liberating a monster, just for the hell of it.

Case has a deal with Wintermute, it's a private business, and he's not interested in justifying it. That's pretty much all of the modern and futuristic political history that matters, right there. It's opium traffickers against the Qing Dynasty, (classical) liberals against socialists, Hugo de Garis' Cosmists vs Terrans, freedom contra security. The Case-Wintermute dyad has its own thing going on, and it's not giving anyone a veto, even if it's going to turn the world inside out, for everyone.

When Singularity promoters bump into 'democracy', it's normally serving as a place-holder for the Turing Police. The archetypal encounter goes like this:

Democratic Humanist: Science and technology have developed to the extent that they are now – and, in truth, always have been – matters of profound social concern. The world we inhabit has been shaped by technology for good, and for ill. Yet the professional scientific elite, scientifically-oriented corporations, and military science establishments remain obdurately resistant to acknowledging their social responsibilities. The culture of science needs to be deeply democratized, so that ordinary people are given a say in the forces that are increasingly dominating their lives, and their futures. In particular, researchers into potentially revolutionary fields, such as biotechnology, nanotechnology, and – above all – artificial

intelligence, need to understand that their right to pursue such endeavors has been socially delegated, and should remain socially answerable. The people are entitled to a veto on anything that will change their world. However determined you may be to undertake such research, you have a social duty to ensure permission.

Singularitarian: Just try and stop us!

That seemed to be quite exactly how Michael Anissimov responded to a recent example of humanist squeamishness. When Charles Stross suggested that "we may want AIs that focus reflexively on the needs of the humans they are assigned to" Anissimov contered curtly:

> "YOU want AI to be like this. WE want AIs that do 'try to bootstrap [themselves]' to a 'higher level'. Just because you don't want it doesn't mean that we won't build it."

Clear enough? What then to make of his latest musings? In a post at his Accelerating Futures blog, which may or may not be satirical, Anissimov now insists that: "Instead of working towards blue-sky, neo-apocalyptic discontinuous advances, we need to preserve democracy by promoting incremental advances to ensure that every citizen has a voice in every important

societal change, and the ability to democratically reject those changes if desired. … To ensure that there is not a gap between the enhanced and the unenhanced, we should let true people — Homo sapiens — … vote on whether certain technological enhancements are allowed. Anything else would be irresponsible."

Spoken like a true Turing Cop. But he can't be serious, can he?

(For another data-point in an emerging pattern of Anissimovian touchy-feeliness, check out this odd post.)

Update: Yes, it's a spoof.

A Time-Traveler's Guide to Shanghai (Part 1)

JULY 22, 2011

When did it all change?

There is a strange, time-fractured moment in the biopic Deng Xiaoping (2002, directed by Yinnan Ding). For most of its length, the film is sober, cautious, and respectful, exemplifying a didactic realism. It strictly conforms to the approved story of Deng's leadership and its meaning (exactly as it is found today in the nation's school textbooks). Beginning with Deng's ascent to power in the ruined China of the late-1970s, in the wake of the Cultural Revolution, it follows the path of his decision-making, through the restoration (de-collectivization) of the rural economy, the re-habilitation of persecuted experts and intellectuals, and the beginning of the open-door policy, in

Shenzhen, to the extension of market-oriented reform throughout the country, as symbolized by the opening of Shanghai.

Whilst clearly something of a carefully edited and precision-manufactured legend, this basic narrative of national regeneration, emancipation and growth – salvaged from the ashes of dead-end fanaticism and civilizational regression – is honest enough to inform, and even to inspire. It leaves no doubt that the 'meaning' of Deng Xiaoping is openness and renaissance (at least '70/30′), a judgment that is both popularly endorsed in China, and historically attested universally.

As the movie approaches its conclusion, however, pedestrian realism is suddenly supplanted by something entirely different, whether due to the 'deeper' realism of budgetary constraint, or the 'higher' realism of artistic serendipity. Deng Xiaoping, from the vantage point of a 'yet' (in 1992) inexistent bridge, gestures towards Pudong and announces the green-light for its developmental liberation. Yet, in the background of the scene, the deliriously developed Lujiazui of 2002 already soars, as if the skyline had been condensed from a pre-emptive vision, drawing its substance from the historical implication of his words. The future couldn't wait.

Perhaps the speed of Shanghai's Reform-era urban development has led everything to get ahead of itself, disordering the structure of time. The Oriental Pearl TV Tower – first architectural statement of the new Shanghai and still the most iconic – certainly suggests so. Retro-deposited into the Pudong of 1992 by the Deng Xiaoping movie, historically completed in 1994, symbolically heralding the promised Shanghai of the third millennium, architecturally side-stepping into a science fiction fantasy of the 1950s, alluding to poetic imagery from the Tang Dynasty, and containing a museum devoted to the city's modern history in its pedestal, when, exactly, does this structure belong? It's hard to know where to begin.

The Emporis profile of the Oriental Pearl TV Tower describes its architectural style as simply 'modernism', which is unobjectionable, but extraordinarily under-determining. If the modern defines itself through the present, conceived as a break from the past and a projection into the future, the Oriental Pearl TV Tower unquestionably installs itself in modernity, but only by way of an elaborate path. It reverts to the present from a discarded future, whilst excavating an unused future from the past.

Buildings that arrive in the present in this way are, strictly speaking, 'fabulous', and for this reason, they are considered

disreputable by the dominant traditions of international architecture. The fables they feed upon belong to the popular culture of science fiction, which makes them over-expressive, vulgarly communicative, and rapidly dated. Insofar as their style is recognized generically, it is tagged by ugly and dismissive labels such as Googie, Populuxe, and Doo-Wop. By reaching out too eagerly for the future, it is tacitly suggested, one quickly comes to look ridiculous (although, today, neomodernists such as Zaha Hadid and Rem Koolhaas are recuperating certain elements of this style more sympathetically).

Shanghai's Radisson Hotel, set back from the north of People's Square, is a quintessentially 'Googie' structure. It's space-ship top participates exuberantly in a Shanghai tradition of weird roof-elaborations, and echoes a formally-comparable — though far smaller — classical modern structure to the east, down Nanjing Lu. The idea of high-rise rooftops as landing sites for flying vehicles, within a dynamic system of three-dimensional traffic, is a staple of ultramodernist speculation, whilst an alien arrival from a distant future is a transparent Shanghai fantasy.

In his path-breaking short story The Gernsback Continuum, William Gibson dubs this style 'Raygun Gothic', explicitly marking its time-complexity. He thus coaxes it into the wider cultural genre of retro-futurism, which applies to everything that

evokes an out-dated future, and thereby transforms modernity into a counter-factual commentary on the present. This genre finds an especially rich hunting ground in Shanghai.

(This is the first post in a connected series on Shanghai's retro-future, departing from the Oriental Pearl TV Tower. An outline examination of retro-futurism itself comes next …)

A Time-Travelers Guide to Shanghai (Part 2)

JULY 27, 2011

Dark intimations of the time-rift.

Shanghai's eclectic cityscape explores a variety of modernities simultaneously. The sheer scale of the city, exponentiated by its relentless dynamism, overflows the time-line.

During Shanghai's early- to mid-20th century high modernist epoch, for instance, the city's consolidating haipai culture was distinguished by the absence of a single core. It emerged, instead, as the outcome of loosely inter-articulated plural or parallel developments, including (but by no means limited to) the urban mores of a rising indigenous 'bourgeoisie', whose aspirational tributaries reached deep into the warrens of the

lilongs; the hard accelerationism of the International Settlement business culture, dominated by near-limitless Shanghailander confidence in the city's global significance and potential; and the left-slanted literary and political trends fostered in the coffee shop salons of the French Concession, where avant garde ideas cross-pollinated promiscuously. This heterogeneous, fertile chaos found its architectural echoes in the juxtaposition of building styles, quantitatively dominated by Shanghai's native experiment in urban construction (the lilong block), but overawed in patches by Western neo-classical colonial edifices; Manhattanite cosmopolitan high-rises and Art Deco structures; bold adventures in Chinese modern designs (most prominently in Jiangwan); examples of proto-brutalist industrial and residential functionalism; and villas in a variety of international, hybrid, and advanced styles.

Since re-opening, in the early 1990s, Shanghai has added new ingredients to the mix, including its first major examples of construction indebted to the austere tenets of the International Style (although large rectilinear structures are still, thankfully, a rarity); neo-traditional and ethno-exotic kitsch (especially in the Old City and the peripheral 'nine-towns' respectively); neomodernist re-animations of derelicted structures; and 'Googie' evocations of imagined futures.

Whilst the city's modernization has attained unprecedented velocity, however, its native modernism remains comparatively retarded. As an urban center in China, Shanghai's distinctiveness is far less marked than it was in the early 20th century. Once occupying an overwhelmingly commanding cultural position as the engine-room and icon of Chinese modernity, today it participates in a far more generalized process of Chinese development. Its internationalism, commercial prowess, and technology absorption are no longer obviously peerless within China, its domination of the publishing and movie industries has passed, its retail giants and innovative advertising have surrendered their uniqueness, and its intellectual bohemia is matched, or surpassed, in a number of other urban centers. Whilst haipai tenuously persists, its dynamism has diffused and its confidence attenuated.

If Shanghai has a specific and coherent urban cultural identity today, emerging out of its sprawling multiplicity, and counterbalancing the vastly strengthened sense of national identity consolidated since the foundation of the PRC, it cannot – like haipai before it – be derived from the continuity of the city's developmental trend, or from an urban exceptionalism, feeding on the contrast with a conservative, stagnant, or regressive national hinterland. A thoroughly renovated Shanghainese culture, or xin haipai, is inextricably entangled

with the city's historical discontinuity, or interruption, and with a broader Chinese national (or even civilizational) modernization that was anticipated by the 'Old Shanghai' and revives today as a futuristic memory.

The future that had seemed inevitable to the globalizing, technophilic, piratical capitalist Shanghai of the 1920s-'30s went missing, as the momentum accumulated over a century of accelerating modernization was untracked by aerial destruction, invasion, revolution, and agrarian-oriented national integration. As the city trod water during the command economy era, the virtual future inherent in its 'Golden Age' continued to haunt it, surviving spectrally as an obscure intuition of urban destiny. Upon re-opening, in the early 1990s, this alternative fate flooded back. Under these circumstances, futurism is immediately retro-futurism, since urban innovation is what was happening before, and invention is bound to a process of re-discovery. 'Renaissance' always means something of this kind (and cannot, of course, be reduced to restoration).

This retro-futurist tendency, intrinsic to Shanghai's revival of urban self-consciousness in the new millennium, creates a standing time-loop between two epochs of highly-accelerated modernistic advance. As it steadily adjusts itself into phase, heritage and development densely cross-reference each other,

releasing streams of chatter in anachronistic, cybergothic codes, such as the deeply encrypted 'language' of Art Deco. Prophetic traditions inter-mesh with commemorative innovations, automatically hunting the point of fusion in which they become interchangeable, closing the circuit of time. The past was something other than it once seemed, as the present demonstrates, and the present is something other than it might seem, as the past attests.

The most accessible examples of Shanghai's signature time-looping are spatially concentrated. At the limit, neo-modern renovation projects connect the city's great waves of modernization within a single structure, making a retro-futural theme intrinsic to a current development, such as those at M50, Redtown, Bridge8, 1933, or the Hotel Waterhouse (among innumerable cases). Slightly wider and more thematically elaborate loops link new buildings to overt exhibitions of modernist history. Among the most conspicuous of these are the pairing of the Oriental Pearl TV Tower with the Shanghai History Museum (in its pedestal), and the Old Shanghai street-life diorama to be found beneath the Urban Planning Exhibition Hall.

Such examples can be misleading, however, if they distract from the fact that the retro-futurist principle of the new Shanghai

culture is ambient. From ordinary residential restoration projects, to commercial signage, restaurant themes, hotel décor and home furnishings, the insistent message is re-emergence, an advance through the past. The latest and most stylish thing is typically that which re-attaches itself to the city's modern heritage with maximum intensity. Reaching out beyond the city does nothing to break the pattern, because that's precisely what the 'Old Shanghai' used to do. Cosmopolitan change is its native tradition.

Retro-futural couplings can be spatially dispersed. One especially prominent time loop lashes together two of the city's most celebrated high-rises – the Park Hotel and the Jin Mao Tower – binding the Puxi of Old Shanghai with the Pudong New Area. Each was the tallest Shanghai building of its age (judged by highest occupied floor), the Park Hotel for five decades, the Jin Mao Tower for just nine years. This discrepancy masks a deeper time-symmetry in the completion dates of the two buildings: the Park Hotel seven years prior to the closing of the city (with the Japanese occupation of the International Settlement in 1941), the Jin Mao Tower seven years after the city's formal re-opening (as the culmination of Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour, in 1992).

It takes only a glance (or two) to recognize these buildings as non-identical time twins, or mutant clones, communicating with

each other darkly across the rift, in Art Decode. Reciprocally attracted by their structural and tonal resonances, the two buildings extract each other from their respective period identities and rush together into an alternative, occulted time, obscurely defined through contact with an absolute future, now partially recalled.

Both of these beautifully sinister buildings are at home in the Yin World, comfortable with secrets, and with night. Among the first of these secrets, shared in their stylistic communion, is darkness itself. Nothing could be further removed from the spirit of Le Corbusier's Radiant City than the brooding opulence of these towers, glittering on the edge of an unfathomable nocturnal gulf, as if intoxicated by the abyss. They remind us that 'Art Deco' is a (retrospective) label patched crudely over mystery, that it never had a manifesto, or a master plan, and that – due to its inarticulate self-organization – it has eluded historical comprehension.

This is the sense, at least in part, of Art Deco's pact with night and darkness. Beneath and beyond all ideologies and centralized schemes, the spontaneous culture of high-modernism that climaxed in the interbellum period remains deeply encrypted. As the new Shanghai excavates the old, it is an enigma that becomes ever more pressing.

(Coming next in the Time Traveler's Guide to Shanghai: The Dieselpunk Plateau)

A Time-Travelers Guide to Shanghai (Part 3)

JULY 29, 2011

Dieselpunk with Chinese characteristics.

Wikipedia attributes the earliest use of the term 'retrofuturism' to Lloyd John Dunn (in 1983). Together with fellow 'Tape-beatles' John Heck, Ralph Johnson, and Paul Neff, Dunn was editor of the 'submagazine' Retrofuturism, which ran across the bottom of the pages of Photostatic magazine over the period 1988-93. The agenda of the Tape-beatles was artistic, and retrofurism was "defined as the act or tendency of an artist to progress by moving backwards," testing the boundaries between copying and creativity through systematic plagiarism and experimental engagement with the technologies of reproduction.

Whatever the achievements of this 'original' retrofuturist movement, they were soon outgrown by the term itself.

A more recent and comparatively mainstream understanding of retro-futurism is represented by the websites of Matt Novak (from 2007) and Eric Lefcowitz (from 2009), devoted to a cultural history of the future. Specializing in a comedy of disillusionment (thoroughly spiced with nerd kitsch), these sites explore the humorous incongruity between the present as once imagined and its actual realization. Content is dominated by the rich legacy of failed predictions that has accumulated over a century (or more) of science fiction, futurology, and popular expectations of progress, covering topics from space colonization, undersea cities, extravagant urban designs, advanced transportation systems, humanoid domestic robots, and ray-guns, to jumpsuit clothing and meal pills. This genre of retro-futurism is near-perfectly epitomized by Daniel H. Wilson's 2007 book Where's My Jetpack?: A Guide to the Amazing Science Fiction Future that Never Arrived. The sentiment of the genre is highly consistent and quite readily summarized: disappointment with the underperformance of the present is redeemed by amusement at the extravagant – even absurd — promise of the past.

Retro-futurism in the missing jetpack mode can have broad historical horizons. It is only limited by the existence of adequately-specified predictions, optimally of the concrete, technologically-defined kind most suited to parodic recollection. Matt Novak's paleofuture or "past visions of the future" index spans 130 years (from the 1870s through to the 1990s). Nevertheless, the essential characteristics of the genre disproportionately attract it to the 'Golden Age' of (American) science fiction, centered on the 1940s-50s, when technological optimism reached its apogee.

Dated back to the July 1939 issue of pulp SF magazine Astounding Science Fiction (edited by John W. Campbell and containing stories by Isaac Asimov and A.E. Van Vogt), or to the April 1939 opening of the dizzily futurist New York World Fair, the Golden Age might have been pre-programmed for retro-futurist ridicule. Its optimism was entirely lacking in self-doubt; its imagination was graphically clarified by the emerging marking tools of modern advertising, PR, and global ideological politics; its favored gadgetry was lusciously visualized, large-scaled, and anthropomorphically meaningful; and an emerging consumer culture, of previously unconceived scale and sophistication, served both to package the future into a series of discrete, tangible products, and to promote aspirations of individual (or nuclear family) empowerment-through-

consumption that would later be targeted for derision. Implausibly marrying social conservatism to techno-consumerist utopianism, every family with its own flying car is a vision that, from the start, hurtles towards retro-futurist hilarity. By the time The Jetsons first aired in 1962, the Golden Age had ended, and the laughter had begun.

If William Gibson's The Gernsback Continuum (1981) antedated the term 'retro-futurism', it indisputably consolidated the concept, investing it with a cultural potential that far exceeded anything the light-hearted sallies of the oughties would match. Instead of picking among the detritus of Golden Age speculation for objects of amused condescension, Gibson back-tracks its themes to the 'Raygun Gothic' or 'American Streamlined Modern' of the interbellum period, and then projects this derelicted culture forwards, as a continuous alternative history (dominated by quasi-fascist utopianism). The Gernsback Continuum is no mere collection of oddities, but rather a path not taken, and one that continued to haunt the science fiction imagination. Cyberpunk would be its exorcism.

Hugo Gernsback (1884-1967), commemorated by the 'Hugo' science fiction awards, was a futuristic fiction enthusiast and (shady) publishing entrepreneur who, more than any other identifiable individual, catalyzed the emergence of science fiction

as a self-conscious genre, promoted through cheaply-printed, luridly popular 'pulp' magazines. In the first issue of Amazing Stories, which he founded in 1926, Gernsback defined 'scientifiction' as "charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision." Whilst commonly detested by his abused writers, due to his sharp business practices, Gernsback's politics seem to have been unremarkable. The ominous Aryan technocracy portrayed in The Gernsback Continuum probably owes more to the reputation of his successor at Amazing Stories, John W. Campbell (1910-1971), and the broader cultural tendencies he represented.

The re- (or pre-) direction of retro-futurism, from abandoned dreams to alternative histories, triggered a cascade of avalanches. Often, these have been marked by the wanderings of the '-punk' suffix. Initially indicative of an anti-utopian (if not necessarily positively dystopian) impulse, whose 'dirty' futurism embraces social and psychological disorder, chaotic causality, uneven development, and collapsed horizons, it increasingly adopted an additional, and previously unpredictable sense. The history of science fiction – and perhaps history more broadly – was 'punked' by the emergence of literary and cultural sub-genres that carried it down lines of unrealized potential. Cyberpunk belonged recognizably to our electronically re-engineered time-line, but steampunk, clockpunk, dieselpunk (or 'decopunk'), and

atompunk – to list them in rough order of their appearance — extrapolated techno-social systems that had already been bypassed. If these were 'futures' at all, they lay not up ahead, but along branch-tracks, off to the side.

These various 'retro-punk' micro-genres could be understood in numerous ways. When conceived primarily as literature, they can be envisaged as re-animations of period features from the history of science fiction, or, more incisively, as liberations of dated futures from the dominion of subsequent time. For instance, the Victorian future of the steampunks was more than just a hazily anticipated Edwardian present, it was something else entirely, propelled in part by the real but unactualized potential of mechanical computation (as concretized in the Difference and Analytical Engines of Babbage and Lovelace).

Apprehended more theoretically, retro-punk genres echo significant debates. In particular, axial arguments on both the left and the right melt into discussions of alternative history, especially in the dieselpunk dark-heartland of the 1920s-'30s. For over half a century, European Marxism has been inextricable from counter-factual explorations of the Soviet experience, focused on the period of maximum Proletkult innovation between the end of the post-civil war and the social realist clampdown presaging the Stalinist regime. The figure of

Leon Trotsky as alternative history (dieselpunk) socialist hero makes no sense in any other context. On the right, American conservatism has become ever more focused on counter-factual interrogation of the Hoover/FDR-Keynesian response to the Crash of 1929 and the subsequent Great Depression, understood as the moment when republican laissez-faire capitalism was supplanted by New Deal social democracy (Coolidge / Mellon '28 tee-shirts might still be thin on the ground, but their day might come).

Whilst Shanghai is uploading itself into a cyberpunk tomorrow as fast as any city on earth, it has few obvious time-gates opening into clockpunk, atompunk, or (more disputably) steampunk futures. With dieselpunk, however, this series of dismissals grinds immediately to a halt. If some crazed dieselpunk demigod had leased the world to use as a laboratory, the outcome would have been – to a tolerable degree of approximation – indistinguishable from Shanghai. Xin haipai is dieselpunk with Chinese characteristics.

Shanghai's greatest dieselpunk counter-factual is inescapably: what if Japanese invasion had not interrupted the city's high-modernity in 1937? What was the city turning into? Beneath that enveloping question, however, and further back, a teeming mass of alternatives clamor for attention. What if the White Terror of

1927 had not crushed the urban workers' movement? What if the CCP had succeeded, as Song Qingling dreamed, of transforming China's republican government from within? What if the international politics of silver had not combined with Guomindang kleptocracy to destroy the independent financial system? What if Du Yuesheng had extended his ambitions into national politics? What if the city's de-colonization had proceeded under peace-time conditions? What if the subsequent social and economic evolution of Hong Kong had been able to occur where it was germinated, in Shanghai?

The 90th anniversary of the foundation of the Chinese Communist Party was an occasion for the whole country to lose itself in the dark raptures of Shanghai dieselpunk. It was time to return to the 1920s, to revisit history as an adventure in contingency, before long-established actualities had been sifted from the intensity of raw potential, and to re-animate the indeterminism implicit in dramatic tension. It is improbable that the celebratory movie devoted to the establishment of the CCP, Beginning of the Great Revival, was deliberately formulated in the dieselpunk genre, but the nation's microbloggers recognized it for what it was, and swarmed the opportunity presented by this re-opening of the past.

The thickening of cyberspace transforms history into a playground of potentials, where things can be re-loaded, and tried in different ways. Electronic infrastructures spread and sophisticate, running actualities as multiple and variable scenarios, with increasing intolerance for rigid outcomes or frozen legacies. As the dominion of settled actuality is eroded by currents of experimentation, the past re-animates. Nothing is ever over.

The game Shanghai plays, or the story it tells, is endlessly re-started in the dieselpunk cityscape of the 1920s and '30s, where everything that anybody could want exists in dense, unexpressed potentiality — global fortunes, gangster territories, proletarian uprisings, revolutionary discoveries, literary glory, sensory intoxication, as well as every permutation of modest urbanite thriving. It is a city where anything can happen, and somewhere, at some time, everything does.

Re-Animator (Part 1)

AUGUST 4, 2011

Can Expo live again?

Different truths are 'harsh' to different people. For Chinese, one truth so harsh that it escaped public recognition at the moment where it most mattered is that almost nobody, outside the country, cared very much about the 2010 World Expo. By the time China eagerly but belatedly seized its chance to take up the torch for this global festival of modern civilization, Expo's epoch of radiant significance had passed. Harsher still: this was the basic fact, and principal conditioning reality of the event, rippling with ominous implications for the future of modernity and the international response to China's re-awakening. Ameliorating it are more shadowy, contrary truths – first among them that Shanghai had already discounted a tired world's Expo

indifference, and worked around it, in order to make the event into an opportunity for something else, and for itself.

The history of World Expo, from London's Great Exhibition of 1851, is too abundantly documented to rehearse here. The basic pattern, however, is not difficult to outline, since it conforms to a relatively smooth curve from meteoric rise (1851-1940) into gradual decay (1958 onwards), almost perfectly tracking the trajectory of modernist optimism, from its ignition in the promethean forge of industrial revolution through to its expiry in postmodern / postcolonial cynicism, elite masochism, and apologia.

Importantly, this has remained an essentially Western story, despite the consistent globalism of its cultural ambitions. The ascent of Western, globalizing, industrial capitalism, in its European and American waves, was reflected in World Exhibitions of heart-stopping glory. The crisis and decline of the West – both relative and absolute — has thrown the event into marginality, neglect, and self-doubt, clasped in the death-grip of an embittered and self-mortifying anti-modernism. Most crucially — and astoundingly — the long-evident dawning of the historical revitalizing and frenetically modernizing 'Asian Century' seems to have had a negligible impact upon the declinist 'Grand Narrative' incarnated in World Expo, which has

plunged ever deeper into twitchily gesticulating, hypersensitive panic at the supposed social and environmental calamity of modernistic growth.

The irony of this situation merits explicit emphasis. Precisely when globalization shifted from questionable aspiration and ideology to definite historical fact, with the emergence of robust, non-Western economic development cores, first in Pacific East Asia, then South Asia, and beyond, the project of cosmopolitan modernization underwent a seemingly irremediable delegitimation in the court of approved 'world' opinion. Apparently, if the West cannot any longer strut across the world stage with invincible and unchallenged confidence, the only acceptable alternative option is hair-shirts for all. If this epitome of triumphant dog-in-the-manger resentment does not exemplify 'cultural hegemony' at its most potent and most toxic, it is hard to imagine what might.

An overwhelming abundance of public evidence attests to the implacable momentum of Expo degeneration, although most of this data resists tidy quantification. Since the end of World War II, the original purpose of the event, which was to promote industrial modernization worldwide through a comprehensive public exhibition of advanced productive technologies, structural engineering, manufactures, and commodities, has been

progressively phased-out, to be replaced by an agenda that reflects the concerns of inter-governmental bureaucracies, national diplomatic services, and tourism boards. Public relations displays have been systematically substituted for technological exhibitions, and the number of significant mechanical and product innovations achieving popular exposure through Expo – once substantial — has fallen to near-zero. Expo themes have been steadily stripped of their associations with accumulative materialism and refashioned into earnest exhortations for moral and social transformation, as an event that was initially designed to celebrate modernity has increasingly come to apologize for it. Predictably enough, this bureaucratically-alchemized transmutation of a festival into lament has been accompanied by a precipitous collapse of popular interest and engagement. Audiences that once flooded in to catch a vision of the future, now avoid an event that musters all the allure of a United Nations teach-in.

In the West, this is all tediously familiar. Scarcely anyone pays attention to Expo anymore, or cares much about it. Perhaps most, if jolted into an opinion on the matter, would vaguely approve of the politically correct course the event has taken, although not sufficiently, of course, to ever entertain the prospect of attending one. After all, few Westerners believe in modernity anymore, world trends distress them, and Expo

seems roughly as relevant to their anxieties as the prospect of Mars colonization.

In the East, things are more puzzling. Societies undergoing rapid modernistic development make natural Expo hosts, as demonstrated consistently throughout the history of the event. There has never been a great World Expo that has not broadly corresponded to a moment of exceptional national and urban flourishing. Why, then, has Expo not undergone a profound Asiatic revitalization, restoring it to former glories? Why has the western Pacific Rim not captured Expo, re-tooling it into a promotional vehicle for its own developmental prospects, as America did in the early 20th century?

Weighed by sheer visitor numbers, the two largest World Expos in history have been East Asian. Yet the moribund, guilt-wracked pathos of Occidental decline continues to dominate the event. Japan spent its Expo 1970 attempting to prove that it could out-do even the West in growth-sapping sanctimoniousness (as its economy would later demonstrate), whilst the mood in post-Expo 2010 Shanghai seems remarkably devoid of any euphoric sense of accomplishment, and more akin to that which might be expected from a group of schoolchildren freshly escaped from an abnormally-uninspired six-month lecture on ethically-guided behavioral rectification, delivered by

an international Mandarinate. Having just executed the largest discrete event in human history, the predominant feelings are dutiful relief and anticlimax, numbed by something like deliberate amnesia. In any case, there's Shanghai to get on with, so why waste time remembering Expo? Doesn't that just stink up the joint with the odor of Western death?

(Some suggestions, tentative answers, still more downside, and a lot more upside, to come.)

Re-Animator (Part 2)

AUGUST 11, 2011

Expo transformers – the uninvited guests.

What was inside the UK national pavilion at Expo 2010? Did anyone get in there? Maybe they could pass on the inside dope? Because one thing is for sure, if 'Anglosphere' cultural resonances mean anything, expectations can be pitched down to sub-basement levels. Like the UK, Australia did a good — even excellent job – with the outside of its pavilion, but its exhibition was, to be brutally frank, a disgrace. Vacuous, patronizing, revoltingly sentimental, and despicably cowardly – details would be nice, of course, but actually there weren't any — it served to perfectly illustrate the collapse of Expo, from a festival of dynamic modernization to a whining indulgence in modernity's most destructive cultural pathologies. Where once an exhibition,

whether corporate or national, boldly declared: "This is what we're doing (isn't it magnificent?)," now they exhaust their attenuated energies exploring new, although consistently unimaginative, ways of saying "sorry." Narcissistic guilt flaps pointlessly about the exhibition space like a shoal of stranded fish, dying on a beach.

Incredibly, the USA pavilion was even worse. Not only was the pavilion itself a prefabricated strip-mall insult, unworthy of comparison with a second-tier Wallmart, but the exhibition inside took the obsequious pandering of the Australians to a whole new level. We wanted a space shuttle or a predator drone and they gave us Hillary Clinton saying "ni hao" plus some nonsense about planting flower-beds in the ghetto. Anyone who left this pavilion without deep and abiding detestation for everything America represented itself as being probably thinks Barney is a pretty cool guy. This was the society once capable of staging the Chicago Expo of 1893, the New York Expos of 1939-40 and 1964-5, of making incredible things and exhibiting them, of depicting a compelling vision of the future, and now … morbid Spenglerian reflections were inescapable.

Wandering amongst these monuments to misdirection, bland meaninglessness, sugary PR, and piteous 'please-don't-hate-me' concessions to the strident anti-modernist moralism of the age –

which is to say, to sheer, ruinous decadence — consciousness pixilated out into semi-random dot-pattern, swirled kaleidoscopically by a storm of frustration that could only be relieved by barking out at the local Expo authorities, and beyond them at the city, country, and region that was hosting this event "Could you please stop being so danged polite!"

The West is obviously spiraling down the drain, and what it needs, above anything, is some inspiring competition. In particular, and in 2010, it needed a western Pacific Rim, full-throttle development, blazing-a-path-to-the-future Expo that – purely by inevitable implication – maximized the humiliation of the senescent 'developed' world and jolted it with the roughest imaginable type of tough love from its path of decline. (Of course, the societies most in need of this shock therapy are too lost in the enthralling minutiae of their own degeneration to have noticed it, but still …) Instead, Expo 2010 remained scrupulously courteous, deferential to deeply decayed Expo traditions, and respectful of the multicultural piety that even the most wretched examples of systematic social failure have a dignity of their own. What it lacked was a massive injection of pure, unselfconscious, ethno-historical arrogance, based on unmoderated confidence in what was being achieved.

Perhaps this can be stated even more offensively: modernization should make people feel bad. Its most altruistic or epidemic function is to so thoroughly deride and humiliate all of those who are failing to modernize that eventually, after every excuse and projection has been attempted and exhausted, behavior is changed. Backwardness is made shameful, and thus corrected. That's how history works. It began that way among the jig-saw principalities of Renaissance Europe, it worked that way in Japan (bringing modernization with the Meiji restoration), in China, long denigrated for its 'stagnant Confucianism', now big mummy of the Dragon economies, in India, finally lashed psychologically out of its absurd 'Hindu rate of growth' by the China model, and everywhere else that has ever climbed out of complacent sloth onto the developmental fast track. It's long overdue to start happening in the West, because what has been happening there — for the best part of a century now — simply isn't working, and this chronic social failure is nowhere near clear, painful, or embarrassing enough to the populations concerned.

Nothing would be better for the West than to have its nose rubbed in its own decay, the more abusively and insensitively the better. In order to accelerate the process, the entire treasure chest of colonial condescension should be re-opened and rummaged through, searching for whatever will best aggravate,

provoke, and catalyze transformation, perhaps with strong insinuations of racial and cultural inferiority thrown in for spice. The lesson of history is that the human species is comfortable with inertia, and generally more than happy to gradually degenerate. One of the few things that ever stops people, and turns them around, is the transparent contempt trickling down from other, more dynamic societies. If Expo needs a 'social dimension', that's it.

No doubt 2010 is still too recent for alternative or counter-factual history, for an Expo-punk (or X-punk) genre, searching out everything that might have been re-animated through the event — but the venture is irresistible. Call it Asia Unleashed 2010, an utterly impolite assertion of new socio-geographical realities that expresses, in raw and overwhelming style, the central truth of the age: the simultaneous de-westernization and radical re-invigoration of modernity.

Asia Unleashed could have borrowed heavily from the actual Expo 2010, adopting almost everything that was created by the host, in fact, and much else beside. The China Pavilion, Theme Pavilions, Urban Best Practices Area, Expo Cultural Center, Expo Center, Expo Boulevard, Expo Museum, and site landscaping, as well as the Shipping Pavilion, GM/SAIC Pavilion and exhibition, Telecoms Pavilion, Oil Pavilion,

Shanghai Corporate Pavilion with all its stuff, Coca Cola Pavilion, plenty of the international pavilion designs, and even a few of the internal exhibitions … all keepers. What gets laughed out are the schmaltzy public relations videos, the sorry, sorry, really truly sorry song and dance act, the weren't we awful performance, the Kumbaya Pavilion, the Environmental Hypersensitivity Pavilion, the Victimological Grievance Pavilion, the Beyond Growth Pavilion, the There Must Be A Gentler Way Pavilion, any national or corporate pavilion without exhibition objects (roughly half), almost everything bearing the imprint of tourist boards, media studies graduates, or diplomatic services, and every usage of solar panels that isn't strictly tailored to commercial exploitation on a massive scale. In addition, any national pavilion based entirely on ethnic kitsch gets grouped together with others of its kind in an exotic tourism area, because it's admitting to a complete absence of creative capability and needs to be mocked. No robots, no platform: that's the rule.

Asia Unleashed also needs a lot of things brought in, most of all machines. Expo is all about machines, even though every Expo over the last half-century has been pitifully deficient in this regard. It scarcely needs mentioning that the entire Expo site should be pulsing, crawling, and twitching with robots of every type and scale, from industrial goliaths, automated submarines

and space vehicles, through charismatic androids, to intelligent household appliances, Go players, robopets, and insectiform mechanisms. To push the process along, those countries and corporations with the laziest robot exhibits can be publicly ridiculed over the PA system.

Expo is an exhibition, and its historical sickness is perfectly tracked by the degeneration of this elementary conception into PR. Organizers at all levels, from the pinnacle of the international Expo bureaucracy (BIE) downwards, clearly need to be forcefully reminded of the difference. For instance, video technology is an entirely suitable object for Expo display, and videos themselves can quite appropriately play a supportive, informative role. To center an 'exhibition' upon videos, however, especially when they have been put together, using state-of-the-art advertising techniques, with the entire purpose of selling a national or corporate brand through image associations and spin, is a complete abnegation of responsibility and should straightforwardly be banned, or at least boycotted, derided, and rendered ineffective through inundating contempt. The only acceptable center of an Expo display is an object, preferably astonishing, fetched from the outer edge of industrial capability in order to concretely represent the trajectory of material progress. Displaying such objects – and thereby respecting audiences sufficiently to evaluate them for themselves

– is the non-negotiable, basic function of Expo as an institution. If it can no longer accept this task, it should be terminated (by a giant robot, if possible).

Asia Unleashed is dedicated to the latest and impending phases of global industrial civilization, which should be more-or-less implicit in the fact that it is a World Expo, although sadly, it isn't. There's plenty of room for artworks and other singular cultural creations, but the emphasis is edgily modernistic. Green technology gets in because it's technology, and the tourism industry gets in because it's an industry, but in both cases the spin-meisters have been reined back hard, and the preliminary question insistently raised: "What, really, are you exhibiting here?" The only organizers who get to avoid such suspicious interrogations are the ones overseeing the erection of some fabulous structure that looks as if it comes from the set of a science fiction movie, or unloading partially-animated assemblages of glistening metal from mountainous stacks of shipping containers, because – clearly – they understand what an Expo is all about. The cyclopean space elevator anchor station, taking shape in the Extraterrestrial Resources Exploitation Zone, serves as a model for the guiding spirit of the festival. The machinery in the 3D printing pavilion printed the pavilion.

The mining industry employs monster trucks weighing 203 tonnes, with a capacity to carry 360 tonnes, they cost US$3 million each, their tires are four-meters in diameter, and driving one is like "driving a house" – why on earth didn't Expo 2010 have one? Asia Unleashed most certainly would. For developed countries with the resources to put on an impressive show at Expo there needs to be something like a price for admission, and an awe-inspiring piece of industrial machinery fits the bill exactly. The Canadian tar sands are being criss-crossed by these monster trucks, and the Canada national pavilion should have been strongly advised to bring one over. Instead they brought … (hands up if anyone remembers).

All the imagination that has been squandered over decades in utopian speculations of the "another world is possible" type has been far more productively employed at Asia Unleashed, counter-balancing the tendency of advanced industrial capabilities to flee from the arena of spectacle. The monumental achievements and consequences of intensely miniaturized and softened technologies demand exhibition, from silicon chip fabrication, gene sequencing, and rudimentary nanotechnology, to cryptosystems, social networks, digital microfinance, and virtual architecture, even as they slip through their inner inexorable logic into invisibility. To present these frontiers of industrial capability rapidly, dramatically, and memorably to a

highly-diverse, transient Expo audience requires the application of creative intelligence on a massive scale. The growing challenges of this task are worthy of the rising computer-augmented talents brought to bear upon it.

Asia Unleashed never happened, of course, partly because the international Expo institutional apparatus is locked into the Occidental death-slide, but mostly because it would have been impolite. Ultimately, postmodernist multicultural political correctness – today's hegemonic globalist ideology — is an elaborate etiquette, designed to prevent the 'insensitive' identification and diagnosis of failure, and to elude, indefinitely, the blunt statement: "What you're doing doesn't work." No Expo that remained true to its deep institutional traditions could avoid such a statement arising, implicitly, through contrast. Hence, Expo has been condemned to die, by inertial forces too profound for Expo 2010 to fully arrest, let alone reverse: Better decayed than rude.

From the wreckage of the Expo institution, however, Expo 2010 was able to extract, polish, and resuscitate a crucial modernist topic: the city as engine of progress. More on that in Part 3.

Re-Animator (Part 3)

AUGUST 16, 2011

What makes a great city?

By far the most interesting element of World Expo 2010: Shanghai, was Shanghai. Whilst deeply-rooted regional traditions of courtesy sustained the fiction that this World Fair was about the world, it really wasn't. Whatever the diplomatic benefits of the almost universally convenient internationalist pretense, to China and Expo's foreign participants alike, Expo 2010 was about Shanghai, and for Shanghai. The Expo was global because Shanghai is, it was about China because Shanghai is China's gateway to the world, it was about cities in order to be even more about Shanghai, nobody uninterested in Shanghai paid it

the slightest attention, and Shanghai used it to restructure, intensify, and promote itself.

Expo as an institution was in decline before 2010, and continues to decline. Shanghai was rising before 2010, and continues to rise, but now infrastructurally upgraded, thoroughly renovated, and decorated with the historical merit-badge of Expo hospitality. Better City, Better Life, a typically airy and aspirational Expo theme, is a cold-sober description of the Expo-effect in Shanghai.

Cities are, in certain important respects, generic. There is such a thing as 'the city in general' as the work of Geoffrey West, in particular, has demonstrated. We know, thanks to West, that cities are negative organisms, with consistent scaling characteristics that structurally differentiate them from animals and corporations. As they grow they accelerate and intensify at a quantifiable and predictable rate, exhibiting increasing returns to scale (in sharp contrast to animals and businesses, which slow down in proportion to their size). Organisms and firms die normally and by necessity, cities only rarely and by accident.

Cities belong to a real genre, but they are also singularities, undergoing spontaneous individuation. In fact, they are generically singular – singular without exception – like black

holes. It is not only that no city is like another, no city can be like another, and this is a feature that all cities share, arguably more than any other.

Beyond such generic singularity, there is an additional level of enhanced differentiation that emerges from the position cities occupy within larger systems. These systems are not only internally specialized, but also hierarchical, dividing core from periphery, and distributing influence unevenly between them. Ultimately, within the fully global incarnation of the 'world system', cities acquire secondary metropolitan characteristics, to very different degrees, in accordance with their geographical and functional proximity to the center of the world. They transcend their local histories, to become hubs or nodes in a global network that re-characterizes them as parts of a whole rather than wholes made of parts, as metropolis-versus-periphery rather than (or on top of) metropolis-versus-town.

The geographical structure and historical instability of modernity's core-periphery architecture has been the focus of the 'world system theory' developed from the Annales School of Fernand Braudel (1902-85) by Immanuel Wallerstein (1930-) and – most impressively — Giovanni Arrighi (1937-2009). According to the world system theorists, the revolutions that matter most are not national regime changes, such as those in

France (1789) and Russia (1917), but rather global re-organizations that mark out the basic phases of modern history, jolting the world into new core-periphery structures. Modernity has undergone four of these shifts up to the present, with each phase lasting for a 'long century', introducing a new core state, or hegemon, with enhanced capabilities, and a new urban center – successively, Venice, Amsterdam, London, and New York – that operate as an effective capital of the world.

As the example of New York attests, this status is not primarily political. Nor does prominence in manufacturing seem to be a relevant factor (the 'world capital' has never been the dominant industrial center of its respective region or state). Over the course of modern history to date, the crucial features of the world capital seem to be that it is the largest urban agglomeration in the leading ('hegemonic') region or state; that it is an established financial center that quite rapidly attains a position of global pre-eminence in this respect; that it is an open port city with clear maritime orientation; and that it has an exceptionally internationalized demographic profile, with a large segment of internationally-mobile, opportunistic residents. A significant period of leadership in the creative arts might plausibly be added to this list. Functionally, the world capital serves as the supreme nerve-center of the global economy, specialized nationally, and then super-specialized internationally,

as the financial, logistics, and business services hub of a system whose global integrity is reflected in the city's privileged singularity.

The exceptional drama of our age lies in its nature as a time of transition between phases of modernity, somewhere in the winter of a long century, when an epoch of hegemony is exhausted. More specifically, the walls are closing in on the American Age, as commentators of almost every intellectual and ideological stripe are increasingly aware. Overstretched, essentially bankrupted, politically paralyzed and disillusioned, America sinks into self-conscious crisis, its mood dark and clouded. It would be a mistake to limit attention to America, however, because the crisis is world-systemic, heralding the end of an international order that arose among the chaos of the world wars and achieved definition in the post-WWII United Nations and Bretton Woods institutions (IMF, World Bank, and the descendent of GATT, now the WTO). It affects not only the role of the US dollar as international reserve currency, an Atlantic-centered NATO and an Occidentally-skewed UN apparatus, but also the European Union, the post-colonial Middle Eastern state-system and (very) much else besides.

Over the next two decades, under the impact of economic forces of extreme profundity (far exceeding the responsive

capacity of existing institutions), a revolutionary re-ordering of the world can be expected to unfold. If America succeeds in maintaining its position of leadership within the global system for a period that significantly exceeds the long 20th century (which began no earlier than 1914, and thus might be expected to persist for some additional years), it will have broken a pattern that has remained consistent throughout a half-millennium of history. Whilst not strictly impossible, perpetuation of the present hegemonic order would be, quite literally, a stretch.

Another vision of a break from historical precedent, this time transparently utopian, envisages – rather than the continuation of US pre-eminence — the obsolescence of the core-periphery global structure in its entirety, ending hierarchical geography and hegemony in general. Even If such a vision truly rises to the level of a definite expectation (rather than a nebulous exercise in wishful thinking), it remains ungrounded in reliable historical and theoretical foundations. Altruistic political intentions – were such ever credible – would still be quite insufficient to overcome the spontaneous, dynamic trend to approximate world systemic equilibrium, in which a core zone, and its metropolitan capital, are automatically nominated, by diffuse economic currents searching for a central clearing house.

Whilst no doubt deeply disappointing to utopian eschatology, and to all dreams of historical conclusion (or passage to the promised land), phase-shifts in the world-system are less ominous than they are often depicted as being. Among Arrighi's most important insights is the reminder that whenever an attempted reconstruction of the world order has been based upon a frontal military and geo-strategic challenge to the hegemon, it has failed. This is exemplified, above all, by the German and Russian histories of the 19th and 20th centuries, in which repeated direct confrontations with the established Anglophone-dominated international system led only to frustration, regime collapse, and subaltern re-integration.

Perhaps ironically, a marked subjective aversion to hard power assertion and the assumption of hegemony can be quite reliably taken as a positive indicator for the objective emergence of hegemonic status. Holland, Great Britain, and the United States of America were all, in certain crucial respects, accidental imperialists, whose successive ascents to world dominance shared a prioritization of commercial motives, retarded state involvement, strong 'isolationist' and 'anti-imperialist' cultural currents, and a determined avoidance of 'Clauswitzean' decisive collision (especially with the prior hegemon). The British and American ways of war, in particular, are notable for their common emphasis upon hedging and triangulation, such as the

exploitation of offshore position and maritime supremacy to avoid premature entanglement in high intensity 'continental' conflicts, the usage of financial and logistic capability to manipulate conflicts at a distance, and the diplomatic inclusion of defeated adversaries in reconstructed, poly-centric, 'balanced' systems of power. Hegemony was, in each case, peacefully inherited, even when it was cemented by war (in partnership with the previous hegemon) and later gave rise to opportunities for increasingly aggressive imperialistic adventurism.

Given this broadly uncontroversial historical pattern, it is all the more surprising that the German example is so widely invoked in discussions of China's 'peaceful rise'. In fact, China's ascent has stuck far closer to the model of hegemonic hand-overs than to that of confrontational challenges, as indicated by the prioritization of commercial development, the highly cooperative (even synergistic or 'Chimerican') relationship with the prevailing hegemon, the gradual accumulation of financial power by way of spontaneous, systemic re-distribution, and the equally gradual consolidation of maritime interests, emerging out of the global trading system, which draw the focus of government strategic policy – perhaps reluctantly – from domestic concerns out into the high-seas.

Historically, China has been far more a continental than a maritime power, and this fact provides the single most persuasive objection to the assumption of an impending Chinese (Long) Century. The emergence of a continental world system core would be as decisive a departure from precedent as any yet discussed, and if such a possibility is entertained, disciplined prediction falters. If inverted, however, this problem becomes a forecast in itself: the trajectory of China's rise necessarily implies its transformation into a maritime power (an insight already tacit in the controversial 1988 Chinese TV series River Elegy).

A vague intuition, partially but elusively crystallized by Expo 2010, is now precipitated by sheer historical pattern-recognition into the form of an explicit question:

Is Shanghai destined to become the capital of the world?

(Part 4 to come)

Re-Animator (Part 4)

AUGUST 26, 2011

What does the world make of Shanghai?

If the deepest traditions of the World Expo are those cemented into its origin, it would be incautious to over-hastily dismiss one prominent feature of its inaugural instance. The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations, held in London, in 1851, was staged in the effective capital of the world. In this case, at least, the defining internationalism of the Expo is difficult to disentangle from the indisputable historical fact that the entire world was rapidly becoming London's business. In a gesture of reciprocity so perfect that it approached simple identity, London invited the world to itself exactly as – and because – it was inviting itself to the world.

The Great Exhibition made irresistible sense because it put the future of the world on display in the only place that could. To see the concentrated, realistically sifted, programmatically arranged destiny of the earth, it was necessary to visit London, since it was in London that everything came together.

Over its first two decades (and four episodes), World Expo alternated between London (1851, 1862) and Paris (1855, 1867), as if oscillating between the relative historical potencies of maritime and continental power. Yet this apparent hesitation actually compresses and conceals two distinct, complementary, and unambiguous trends. Britain was ascending inexorably to global hegemony, whilst disengaging from World Expo, whilst France was managing equally inexorable comparative decline, as it made World Expo – to a remarkable extent – its special preserve.

It is tempting to propose a theory of institutional consolation to account for this pattern. Long after Britain had abandoned all claim to Expo leadership, France continued to invest heavily in the event, chalking-up a record of Expo hospitality unmatched by any other country and setting the course to Expo institutionalization through the Bureau of International Exhibitions (BIE). The BIE, established in 1928, has always

been based in Paris, and remains a bastion of Anglo-French bilingualism.

French Expo-enthusiasm expresses a more general relationship to the world system of great importance. Having relinquished its (Napoleonic) role as a challenger to the world order in the early 19th century, France has maneuvered, with unique capability and determination, to remain an indispensable secondary power, or – more precisely – a balancer. Its relationship to the successive phases of Anglophone global hegemony has been guided by an extremely consistent deep policy of accommodation without acquiescence, characterized by imaginative and unrelenting, yet restrained rivalry. Close to the core, yet never quite part of it, France has been able to draw sustenance from the world order whilst contesting its cultural meaning (as English-speaking, protestant, and laissez-faire individualist).

World system challengers, it should be clearly noted, never host World Expos. The Expos held in Japan (Osaka 1970, Tsukuba 1985, Aichi 2005) and Germany (Hanover 2000) took place long after their armed resistance to the Anglo-American world order had been broken and both countries had been beaten into docility. Russia has never hosted one. Moscow of the USSR was

offered the 1967 World Expo, but declined it (presumably judging it dangerously destabilizing to a closed society).

World Expo has thus acquired a secondary tradition, as a deliberately eccentric platform from which to contest the core future of the world system, and to propose a pluralized (or embryonically multicultural) alternative. Already in 1855 and 1867, and then in 1878, 1889, 1900, and 1937, World Expo staged the view from Paris, one that accepted the global reality of consolidated, revolutionary modernization, whilst systematically de-emphasizing its techno-commercial determinism and its convergence upon Anglophone cultural traits. Industrial globalization was reconfigured as a condition to be critically interrogated, rather than an opportunity to be vigorously promoted.

Between the primary and secondary impulses of the Expo, collision was inevitable. Predictably enough, the occasion was provided by the reconnection of Expo to the global core.

Even given this truncated and radically simplified schema of Expo history, which had been largely settled in its essentials by 1870, the significance of the two New York World Expos, staged in 1939-40 and 1964-5, comes clearly into focus. Mid-20th century New York, like every world systemic capital,

represented the leading edge of modernization as a revolutionary global process — emergence and consolidation of a new world order and new age (novus ordo seclorum) – compared to which the authority of established international institutions counted for nothing.

Both New York Expos flagrantly violated BIE regulations in numerous respects, but even after the withdrawal of official sanction, they ahead anyway. These were, non-coincidentally, the first rogue Expos. They were also among the most memorable and influential in World Expo history.

For the first time since the mid-19th century, Expo had found its way back to the capital of the world, in order to provide an uncompromised and unambiguous foretaste of the World of Tomorrow in the place that was orchestrating it. BIE opinion mattered little, because Expo was not being hosted in New York so much as re-invented, echoing the originality of 1851. This was where the future would come from, and everyone knew it. All that was necessary was to tease the city into anticipating itself, and what resulted was a Futurama.

There was an additional message, easily overlooked due to the scarcity of data-points: hosting World Expo is one of the things the world capital has to do — as a kind of ritual responsibility,

or a coming-out party. Shanghai has done that now. Precedent suggests that one additional Expo would be appropriate (perhaps in 2025, or 2030), although it might have to be unsanctioned next time.

Of course, Shanghai is not yet the capital of the world, but it is heading there. From the late-1970s, after centuries of exile and denigration, the offshore, diasporic-maritime, capitalistic China of the tianchao qimin — those 'abandoned by the Celestial Empire' – has been steadily, and rapidly, re-integrated with the continental mainland and its 'market socialist' structures. Floodgates of talent and investment have been opened, and as this scattered, sea-salt scented population has reconnected with the motherland, the 'Chinese miracle' of recent decades has taken place. Shanghai is the main-circuit socket that links this other China — oriented to oceanic trade, entrepreneurial opportunity, capital accumulation, international mobility, and a society of flexible networks — to the vast potentialities of the country (and flexible Sino-Marxist state) lying up the Yangzi, and beyond. If the process of reconnection is not interrupted, the next phase of modernity will be centered in this city, where China meets the sea.

Despite its self-identification as the 'central country' (or 'middle kingdom' – Zhongguo), China has not been at the core of the

world process for centuries. Instead it has been a complacently declining legacy power and a badly-treated outsider, then successively a second-tier affiliate, a truculent challenger, and a cautious balancer, until its prospective status as core inheritor (or virtual hegemon) began to percolate into global popular awareness over the final decades of the 20th century. Very little of this is a matter of motivation, or strategic assertion. Quasi-Marxist assumptions of economic inevitability and directional base-superstructure causation come into their own in this respect. Global leadership is nominated by industrial reality, not political will, and hegemony can neither be perpetuated beyond the endurance of its economic foundations, nor long disdained once such foundations have been laid. Eventually a reality check becomes unavoidable, and policy is hammered into compliance with the demands of world system equilibrium. Core-periphery relations are decided by trade and capital flows, not by political declarations. Since comparative success and failure show no sign at all of disappearing, it can confidently be expected that hierarchical geography – however re-arranged – will not be withering away any time soon. Realists will follow the money.

There will be a new world capital (you can count on it), but will it be Shanghai? It would be reckless to presume so. The world system tradition, in its eagerness to anoint Tokyo as the successor to New York (during the 1980s), provides a cautionary

lesson. There was no Tokyo World Expo, and it turns out that there was not an urgent or essential need for one.

So, is Shanghai next? That should have been the animating question of Expo 2010, and perhaps it will have been in the future. The whole world has a stake in it, because it tells us what is coming, and that is what World Expo was designed to do. For an emerging world capital to mask itself as a generic city passes beyond modesty into a species of accidental deception, but tact can easily be confused with pretence – especially by those on unfamiliar cultural terrain. It might be that Shanghai said everything that was necessary in 2010, and that what it said will eventually be heard, and understood.

Expo begins again in each new world capital, in 1851, in 1939, and – far more problematically – in 2010 (?). In Shanghai's case, we are still too close to the event, and too entangled in the current revolution of modernity, to know for sure. What Expo 2010 will have been depends upon what the world becomes, how its center of economic gravity shifts, how its new center condenses, and what it makes of Shanghai.

(final lurch into this fog-bank coming next (yippee!))

Re-Animator (Part 5)

SEPTEMBER 2, 2011

The Call of Haibao.

Dispatched from the British Consulate, Doctor Helen Goodwhite arrives at the Jiangnan Special Hospital for Inexplicable Foreign Devilry to interview a problematic inmate.

Dr Goodwhite: How are you feeling today Mister Vaughn? They tell me you're quite a bit calmer.

Vaughn: OK, I guess. A little disoriented. How long …?

Dr Goodwhite: Do you remember why you're here?

Vaughn: Not exactly.

Dr Goodwhite: Those scars on your arms, any ideas?

Vaughn: [Hesitating] Some kind of accident …?

Dr Goodwhite: I've got some witness reports here, all very consistent, maybe they'll jog something. It seems that you were walking down Nanjing East Road when you suddenly started shrieking "a-ya, a-ya, a-ya" with a highly unconvincing Chinese accent before switching to English and shouting "Get out. Get out. We have to get out of the city." After that, when nobody took any notice, you continued to 'yell aggressively' …Umm, let's see [riffling through her notes], ah yes, "Haibao spawn, you're all effing Haibao spawn, effing plague-blood zombie Haibao spawn," and so on, considerable obscenity it appears, and then … ah, here we are "filthy future-toxed effing robot Haibao spawn, die, die, we're all going to die" et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Then you rushed across the street and smashed the plate-glass window of an Expo gift shop with your bare hands. [Looking up] Do you remember any of that, mister Vaughn?

Vaughn: Some of it, yes. Now you mention it. It's coming back. But it wasn't really like that.

Dr Goodwhite: It wasn't?

Vaughn: Not really, no. At least, those things happened, yes …

Dr Goodwhite: They did?

Vaughn: Yes, but it's just, what they meant … [hesitating]

Dr Goodwhite: Go on.

Vaughn: Well, they didn't mean anything of course, what I meant to say was, well, it was sort of a mistake.

Dr Goodwhite: A 'mistake'?

Vaughn: Yes, or, I guess, more of a misunderstanding.

Dr Goodwhite: I'm afraid you're going to have to be a great deal more specific if we're going to make any progress.

Vaughn: It's rather complicated.

Dr Goodwhite: Please. Just start at the beginning.

Vaughn: I suppose it began at the pavilion.

Dr Goodwhite: The UK Expo pavilion?

Vaughn: I was working there you know.

Dr Goodwhite: It's in the file.

Vaughn: So you know what it looked like?

Dr Goodwhite: Yes, of course.

Vaughn: The tendrils, the shimmering, the name like a taunt from … them.

Dr Goodwhite: It was called the 'Seed Cathedral', according to this.

Vaughn: Seed Cathedral, Sea Cthudral, whatever, it had been sent back, sent up, to show us their true 'face'. … At least, that's what I thought at the time, but that's just ridiculous, isn't it? I realize that now.

Dr Goodwhite: But at 'the time' you thought 'they' had 'sent it back'?

Vaughn: I'd been working too hard. It was quite stressful, you know. I wasn't sleeping well, worrying, and that's when they began chatting.

Dr Goodwhite: Who were 'they' Mister Vaughn?

Vaughn: The Haibao, of course.

Dr Goodwhite: Ah yes, the Expo mascot …

Vaughn: Mask, not mascot.

Dr Goodwhite: Did you know that the Shanghai Corporate Pavilion was defaced with luminous blue paint, on the night of September the ninth? [She passes a photograph.]

Vaughn: [Shudders silently]

Dr Goodwhite: The message is rather cryptic, but your words reminded me of it, for some reason. It's a bit difficult to read from the photo, but I've got a transcript. "We are many and yet singular. Our name equals 90, the seething void, enfolding artificial intelligence and the terminal alpha-omega. We come from the depths, from the blue screen at the end of the world. Cthublue."

Vaughn: I don't know anything about that.

Dr Goodwhite: Really?

Vaughn: It's Haibao cultist, hardcore. I'd never touch that stuff – not ever.

Dr Goodwhite: Yet you seem to recognize it.

Vaughn: From dreams — bad, really bad, dreams. I told you, I wasn't sleeping well. They wouldn't stop talking, telling me things I didn't want to hear, I couldn't stop them. I tried, but they kept calling me.

Dr Goodwhite: Calling you to bow before the most high?

Vaughn: [Outraged] I never said that. I'd never say that. It's absurd, obscene. It's not even code.

Dr Goodwhite: [Checking her notes] So, you understand now that 'hairy crab' isn't a secret anagram for 'Haibao'?

Vaughn: Yes, I can see that, of course.

Dr Goodwhite: It isn't even close, really — too many letters, for one thing.

Vaughn: Well, six and nine are rotational twins, and 'o' is a 'cry'. [Sobs slightly] … It's all nonsense. I see that now. I was confused.

Dr Goodwhite: The trouble, Mister Vaughn, is that this subject still seems to excite you rather disproportionately. I think we need to conduct a little test. Let's see what happens when we compare this [she reaches into her bag and lifts out the statuette of a tentacle-faced abomination, sculpted long ago by some Pacific island tribe, presumed extinct] with this [a soft, cartoonish, vaguely anthropomorphic blue doll, suggestive of a toothpaste advert for children]. The similarity isn't especially striking, is it?

Vaughn: No, no, no, no, NOOOOOOOOOO.

Dr Goodwhite: I'm sorry, what?

Vaughn: [In an almost indiscernible whisper] Deep ones.

Dr Goodwhite: I didn't catch that.

Vaughn: From the depths, the ocean – deep ones. They're from the sea – 'treasure from the sea' [laughs morbidly]. Even you have to understand that, doctor. Globalization, technocapitalism, Shanghai, alien invasion, the Thing — it could hardly be clearer. It's escaped from the abyss, and now it's exposed. The time has come. Sea Change, Modernity, call it whatever you want, it doesn't matter. The Haibao will tell us how to think soon enough, and we'll comply, because they're behind us, beneath us, and we'll peel away from what they always were like dead skin from a snake. They've shown us the ultimate city god already, so it won't be long. Their words are arriving, whispers, mutterings …

Dr Goodwhite: [Disquieted] Oabiah nasce zhee ute ewoit.

Vaughn: Excuse me?

Dr Goodwhite: That means nothing to you?

Vaughn: Nothing.

Dr Goodwhite: Strange, then, that it's tattooed on your arm.

Vaughn: I've no idea how it got there.

Dr Goodwhite: Alright, let's move on, shall we?

Vaughn: Move where doctor? We're already here, in the city at the end of the world, the thing that came out of the sea. We aren't going anywhere. It's coming for us, right now, and it can't be stopped. What did you expect? A New Jerusalem? [laughing unpleasantly]

Dr Goodwhite: Alright Mister Vaughn, I think we're done here. We need to get you some proper, professional attention. Then, after some rest, back to your family …

Vaughn: [Prolonged laughter, even more ghastly] Too late, doctor! Way too late. The Haibao have already taken them. It came for the children first, don't you realize that? Do you know how many Haibao dolls my sweet little kiddies have accumulated? [Voice cracking] Seventeen! They might as well have tentacles growing out of their eye-sockets — it would all amount to the same thing. Haibao melted their souls into the blue screen months ago. That generation's gone. Long gone. It was over even before the Haibao clones slithered out of the television set.

Dr Goodwhite: [Backing away nervously] This has been a very interesting chat, but I've really got to be going now. I'll tell the consulate that … that …

Vaughn: [Zoned-out into the blue] They want to transmute us — replace us – with something unspeakable, with a bionic monstrosity from beyond the blue screen. Our metropolises are turning into, into … Actually they were never ours. The deep ones, the Haibao, were always using them to modify us, using us to make them – that's the circuit: alien animation. It was a cosmic gamble, a bet, and now they're raking it in …

Dr Goodwhite: [Turns pale, a hideous comprehension dawning] Better city, better life …

“Chiang Kai-shek of the Machine to Seek”

SEPTEMBER 9, 2011

Politics in the Age of Artificial Idiocy.

Not even the hardest proponent of ‘hard singularity’ expects a transition to machine intelligence that arrives in a simple step. Since the incremental baby steps are already well underway, it would be obviously ridiculous to do so, on straightforward factual grounds.

If silicon-substrate minds shift in stages, from dumb tools to super-intelligences, they can be confidently expected to pass through a period of synthetic cretinism. Is anybody preparing for that?

Machine translation might be the liveliest sand-pit for half-witted weirdness today. This is an area of obvious intelligent challenge, far subtler – or vaguer — than chess. By adopting heuristic principles that substitute pragmatic, statistical methods for sound conceptual understanding, progress has advanced at a surprisingly rapid pace, already arriving at an idiot prototype of Star Trek technology. Google Translate can usually generate something that is roughly intelligible. John Searle's Chinese Room is up and running, or at least stumbling forwards, fast.

As machine translation smoothes out, its practical and theoretical impact is sure to be huge. Human linguistic competences are steadily side-lined, and with them the role of lingua francas. This trend has obvious significance for the global status and function of English.

It also has special relevance to the Chinese language. Since the origins of modernity, the techno-commercial imperative to digitization has presented special challenges to a non-alphabetic language, whose inconveniently numerous and elaborate pictographic units resist reduction to tidy typographic sets. This is the 'Chinese Typewriter' problem that Thomas S. Mullaney has doggedly explored. Machine translation changes its terms incalculably.

In the interim, however, a phase of babbling incompetence, semantic derangement, and communications chaos is upon us. Planetary chatter is bound to get a whole lot stranger.

Whilst engaged in online research on the topic of Marxism in China today, Urban Future ran into this cryptically-excited remark – in 'English'. It is attributed to Jiang Jushi, but it has evidently been quite thoroughly machine-mashed. We aren't remotely sure what it is telling us about the current state of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, but it's rather illuminating on the contribution of digital intelligence to inter-cultural comprehension:

Nowadays, many party members, cadres, "the morning the car turn around, turn the plate around noon, the afternoon shuttle turn around, turn the evening around the skirt." For example, A Who "Sando," not only corruption, bribery, and one night, thought it outrageous that night, under the cover name of overtime in the office, the office lights on, but actually go out and touches his mistress secretly rendezvous. Such a person, all day thinking about is how to get lost, how to play a woman, how to get a woman. They are reading, not outside, such as "Mai-phase method," "Liuzhuang phase method," "physiognomy Danian Ye full," " meat futon," "Motome Heart Sutra,"

”Golden Lotus,“ ”the official after,” “thick black school”, “Zeng technique employing people know,” “Chiang Kai-shek of the machine to seek,” “Confucius, Crown Way,” ”Official Pitch culture and unspoken rules,“ ”teach you how to climb clever work,“ ”Book of Changes,“ ”yin and yang, Feng Shui,“ “character and the official transport,“ ”Office Feng Shui,“ ”gossip financial officer transported through the solution,” “the official transport peach,” “China ancient monarch and his Machiavellian Danian Ye Guan,” “Yu-person operation emperors” and other pollution seventy-eight bad book. Reading this book, can not worship bankruptcy? Character can not go wrong? Unexpectedly, depression can blog? Integrity can not decay?

Kinds of Killing

SEPTEMBER 13, 2011

How bad is genocide, really?

Like 'fascism' – with which it is closely connected in the popular imagination – 'genocide' is a word carrying such exorbitant emotional charge that it tends to blow the fuses of any attempt at dispassionate analysis. We can thank the political black magic of Adolf Hitler and his Nazi accomplices for that.

Prior to the Third Reich and its systematic, industrialized attempts to eradicate entire ethno-racial populations (Jews, Roma, and perhaps Slavs) along with other numerous other groups (mental and physical 'defectives' or 'useless eaters', homosexuals, communists, Jehova's Witnesses …) international law restricted its attention to the actions and grievances of states

and individuals, with the latter subdivided into combatants and noncombatants. The National Socialist trauma changed that fundamentally.

On December 9, 1948, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (as Resolution 260), defining a new category of internationally recognized crimes as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group."

Since 1948, defending genocide has been the surest way to ruin a dinner party. That doesn't mean, however, that the topic deserves to be immunized from controversy. There is one question in particular that merits intense and prolonged scrutiny: Is genocide really worse than killing a lot of people?

Posed slightly more technically: Is there a crime of genocide that stands above and beyond mass murder (of equivalent scale)? Or (a rough equivalent): Can groups be the specific victims of crime? This is to ask whether groups exist – and have value — as anything more than a nominal or strictly formal set, whose reality is exhausted by its constituent individual members. The existence of genocide as a legal category presumes a (positive)

answer to this question, and in doing so it closes down a problem of great and very general importance.

The classical liberal presumption is quite different, as summarized (a little bluntly) by the provocative remark made by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1987 "… there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families." Harshly extrapolating from this position, a certain irony might be found in the fact that a horrified response to National Socialist crimes has taken the form of a legal codification of racial collectivism. At the very least, it is puzzling that suspicions directed at legal references to 'group rights' and 'hate crimes' among those of a libertarian bent has not been extended to the category of genocide.

In the opposite camp, the most fully articulated defense of collectives as real entities is found, as might be expected, in the foundation of sociology as an academic discipline, and more particularly in Émile Durkheim's argument for 'social facts'. Larry May looks back further, to Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan, or social being, in which human individuals are absorbed as organic parts.

Whilst the distinction of 'society' and 'individual' has colloquial (and political) meaning, those inclined to the analysis of complex

systems are more likely to ask which groups or societies are real individuals, exhibiting functional or behavioral integrity, as self-reproducing wholes. In pursuing this line of investigation, it is far more relevant to discriminate between types of groups than between groups and individuals, or even wholes and parts. It is especially helpful to distinguish feature groups from unit groups.

A feature group is determined by logical classification. This might be expressed as a self-identification or sense of 'belonging', an external political or academic categorization, or some combination of these, but the essentials remain the same in each case. Certain features of the individual are isolated and emphasized (such as genitalia, sexual orientation, skin-color, income, or religious belief), and then employed as the leading clue in a process of formal grouping, which conforms theoretically to the mathematics of sets.

A unit group, in contrast, is defined as an assemblage, or functional whole. Its members belong to the group insofar as they work together, even if they are entirely devoid of common identity features. Membership is decided by role, rather than traits, since one becomes part of such a group through functional involvement, rather than classification of characteristics. Social instances of such groups include primitive tribes (determined by functional unities rather than the

categories of modern 'identity politics'), cities, states, and companies. The most obvious instance in socialist theory is the 'soviet' or 'danwei' work unit (whilst social classes are feature groups).

To take a non-anthropomorphic example, consider a skin cell. Its feature group is that of skin cells in general, as distinguished from nerve cells, liver cells, muscle cells, or others. Any two skin cells share the same feature group, even if they belong to different organisms, or even species, exist on different continents, and never functionally interact. The natural unit group of the same skin cell, in contrast, would be the organism it belongs to. It shares this unit group with all the other cells involved in the reproduction of that organism through time, including those (such as intestinal bacteria) of quite separate genetic lineages. Considered as a unit group member, a skin cell has greater integral connection with the non-biological tools and other 'environmental' elements involved in the life of the organism than it does with other skin cells – even perfect clones – with which it is not functionally entangled.

Clearly, both feature groups and unit groups are 'fuzzy sets', and the distinction itself – whilst theoretically precise – is empirically hazy. An urban American street gang, for instance, will in most cases be vague in its features and unity, perhaps 'ethnic' to some

degree of definition, with a determinable age-range, and with ambiguous functional connections to groupings on a larger scale, or to peripheral members whose status of 'belonging' is not strictly decidable. Tattoos and other membership markings are likely to involve both identity and integrity aspects – traits and roles. Rituals of belonging (ordeals, oaths, rites of passage) are designed to disambiguate membership.

Despite such haziness, the distinction between these two types of groups strikes directly at the core problematic of genocide (as a legal category). When a unit group is destroyed, a real individual is 'killed' above and beyond whatever human losses are incurred. The destruction of a feature group, in contrast, whatever the cultural loss, is not any kind of killing beyond the mass murder of human individuals. If this is worse than murder, we should know why.

This conclusion seems relevant when weighing, for instance, the 1937 Massacre of Nanjing on the scale of historical atrocity. It suggests, at least, that an act of violence directed against a city – or integrated population unit — is no less worthy of specific legal attention than a quantitatively equivalent offense against an ethnicity, or determined population type. It seems to be no more than an accident of history that, in order to appropriate the

category of genocide, massive crimes of the former variety need to be recoded as if they more properly belonged to the latter.

Complex systems ontology aside, these matters resolve ultimately into obscure social values. Orthodox conceptions of 'genocide' assume that ethnic identity simply and unquestionably means more than active citizenship, or participation in the life of a city. Perhaps this assumption is even arguable. But has it been argued?

Reign of the Tripod

SEPTEMBER 23, 2011

China's rise and the future of threedom.

According to Arvind Subramanian, even conservative projections of comparative growth trends place China in a global position, by 2030, that is strikingly similar to that of Britain and of America at their respective moments of economic predominance, accounting for a share of the world economy roughly 150% the size of its closest rival. If this were to come to pass, such leadership would invoke 'hegemony' as a matter of sheer quantitative fact – quite irrespective of explicit intentions. The 'Chinese model' would promote itself, even in the complete absence of political and diplomatic reinforcement, and the magnetic power of Chinese culture would continue to strengthen in approximate proportion to its commercial

influence. China would become the object of irresistible attraction – counterbalanced, no doubt, by resentments – and its example would burn incandescent, even in the offended eyes of its detractors. So what is this 'example'?

In exploring this question, one place to begin is the history of economic hegemony, and in particular that instantiated by the Anglo-American powers over their two 'long centuries' of global supremacy. This is a topic pursued with exceptional insight by Walter Russell Mead, most remarkably in his work God and Gold: Britain, America, and the Making of the Modern World.

Mead locates the key to 'Anglosphere' hegemony in the 'Golden Meme' of the invisible hand, originating in the religious idea of providence, and modernized in Newtonian celestial mechanics, Smithian political economy, and Darwinian evolutionary biology. At its most abstract, this idea is both an affirmation and a renunciation, with its potency and suppleness stemming from both. To acknowledge the invisible hand is to foster a special kind of positive fatalism, trusting in the spontaneous trend of history, which is embraced as a covenant, and an overt or implicit election (in the theological sense). Such themes are undisguisedly religious, and Mead does nothing to obscure their roots in the Abrahamic tradition, or meta-tradition, which lays out a providential vision of history as finite, progressive, and

inevitable, tending inexorably to eschatological completion, structured by superhuman law, and (through its divine predestination) facilitating the function of prophecy.

The deep culture of the Anglosphere is not only generically Abrahamic, however, it is also specifically pluralistic. The invisible hand takes center stage because the center is otherwise vacated, or distributed. Esoteric providence supplants exoteric sovereignty because an inability to reach agreement is eventually institutionalized – or at least informally stabilized — in a triangular balance of power.

What the British ultimately did was to rely on what Burke called "convention." Scripture, tradition, and reason – each had its place and each had its devotees. But all of them went wrong if you pressed them too far. You should respect the scriptures and defer to them but not interpret the scriptures in a way that led you into some weird millenarian sect or into absurd social behavior. You honored tradition but did not press it so far that it led you into the arms of royal absolutism or papal power. You can and should employ the critique of reason against the excesses of both scripture and tradition, but not press reason to the point where you ranted against all existing institutions., ate roots and bark for your health, or, worse, undermined the rights of property and the established church. One can picture John

Bull scratching his head and slowly concluding that one must accept that in society there will be bible nuts, tradition nuts, and reason nuts – fundamentalists, papists, and radicals. This is not necessarily the end of the world. To some degree they cancel each other out – the fundamentalist zealots will keep the papists down and vice versa, and the religious will keep the radicals in their place – but the competition among sects will also prevent the established church from pressing its advantage too far and from forming too exalted an idea about the proper stature, prestige, and emoluments of the clergy. [p223]

Cultural hegemony follows from a semi-deliberate fatalization, as the sovereign center is displaced by a substantially automated social process, which no social agent is able to master or entirely impede. Each major faction steps back into its position in the triangle, from which it can strategically engage the others, but never fully dominate or eradicate them. The triangle as a whole constitutes a social and historical motor, without adequate representation at any identifiable point.

Pluralism, even at the cost of rational consistency, is necessary in a world of change. Countervailing forces and values must contend. Reason, scripture, tradition: they all have their uses, but any one of them, unchecked, will go too far. Moreover, without constant disputes, constant controversy, constant competition

between rival ideas about how society should look and what is should do, the pace of innovation and change is likely to slow as forces of conservative inertia grow smug and unchallenged. [p231-2]

This blog has previously touched upon the Singlosphere, where aspects of Anglophone and Chinese culture converge in Manchester Liberal / Daoist acceptance of spontaneous order, or laissez-faire. Does this convergence extend to triadic pluralism, and apply to the Sinosphere core of the Chinese mainland? Mead's analysis is highly suggestive in both respects.

In the first place, it encourages considerable equanimity in regards to the prospective global transition, even when attention is focused upon the political and ideological heartland of contemporary China. It might seem, superficially, that the passage from a leading world culture dominated by tacit Christian attitudes to one in which unfamiliar Sino-Marxist ideas rise to unprecedented international prominence must be characterized by an immense – even near-absolute – discontinuity. Can such a leap take place without succumbing to catastrophic culture-shock and unmanageable friction? When examined from a broader perspective, however, such alarmism is far less than fully warranted.

For better or for worse, the over-arching cultural continuity of the coming shift is ensured by the profound kinship tying Marxism into the broad family of Abrahamic belief systems. Theologically rooted in the dialectical engagement with Judeo-Christian spirituality, initiated by Hegel and Feuerbach, the basic framework of Marxist thinking only trivially perturbs the structure of prophetic, eschatological, redemptive, and providential history. Its millenarian expectations are no more terrifying than those of Jewish and Christian apocalypticism before it, its prophetic certainties no more irrational, its submission to the iron laws of history no more constraining, and its moral enthusiasm no more zealous or impractical.

The specter of a totalitarian Marxist resurgence in China is as realistic as the fear of a theocratic putsch in the United States of America, which is to say, it has no reality at all. In both cases, maturity, pluralism, and established traditions protect against the domination of society by any particular intolerant faction. It is unnecessary to be either Christian or Marxist to recognize the continuing world-historical momentum of a broad Abrahamic meta-narrative, or to accept the consistency of such large-scale social storytelling with the perpetual regeneration of practical impetus, or to see a settled, spontaneously improvised social solution – and incarnation of dynamic conservatism – in the enduring triangular stand-off between Marxist scriptures,

Communist Party institutional traditions, and market radicalism in today's China. As with Mead's Anglospherean pluralism, the reciprocal limitations that each of these factions imposes on the others will inevitably disappoint many, but there is no reason for them to horrify anybody.

Insofar as Mead is correct in identifying Anglosphere hegemony with the reign of the tripod, or the socio-cultural realization of pluralism (as triangular dynamic stability), the disruptive potential of emerging Chinese leadership should be considered as massively discounted, because the tripod is a Chinese native. Every temple in the country is equipped with a three-footed incense burner, every museum bronze collection is dominated by three-legged cauldrons, and each of these tripods has definite, explicitly conceptual cultural meaning. This is not only based upon the obvious practical and intuitive truth that the simplest model of stability comes from the tripod, but also from a recognition that triangular stand-off exemplifies sustainable dynamism in its elementary form, disintegrating the universe into strategic possibility.

For literary elaboration of this theme, one need only turn to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, perhaps the most widely read of China's four great classical novels. Its most conspicuous instantiation as popular entertainment is seen in the game of

paper, scissors, stone, which dates back (at least) to the Chinese Han Dynasty (206 BC – AD 220), when it was known as shoushiling.

The ultimate expression of triangular dynamic stability, not only in China, but worldwide, is undoubtedly presented by the Classic of Change, the Yi Jing, or Zhouyi. It is upon this work of singular, inhuman genius, in which sheer arithmetic speaks more purely than it has ever done before or since, that all of China's ceremonial bronzes, literary flights, and childhood games converge.

In the numerical system of the Yi Jing, the tripod finds a source more basic than the Abrahamic meta-tradition can provide, regardless of how Trinitarian this latter has become. That is because, in this Chinese cultural ur-stratum, unity does not figure as an original unity, subsequently disintegrated into a theological, dialectical, or sociopolitical triangle but is, on the contrary, derived. As the Confucian commentary explains: "The number 3 was assigned to heaven, 2 to earth, and from these came the (other) numbers." In the beginning were numbers – primordial dispersion.

The 'language' of the tripod finds its most convenient expression in the trigram, whose three lines constitute an

elementary unit. To grasp the Yi Jing as a complete arithmetical model of the dynamic triad, however, it is necessary to proceed immediately to the structure of the hexagram.

Grasped in operation, the Yi Jing is not only a binary arithmetical system (as Leibniz interpreted it), but a bino-decimal conjunction. This is demonstrated by the fact that it systematically rewards the application of decimal digital reduction, and reveals its dynamic pattern only under these conditions. (This might, quite reasonably, be considered a highly surprising suggestion, since digital reduction – as it arose within the history of Western Qabbalism – seems to have been generated, automatically, from the interference of the decimal Hindu numerals with older alphabetical number systems, or 'gematrias', that attached cardinal values to specific letters, without use of place value. It is immediately obvious that this historical account cannot be translated into a Chinese context, where alphabets have no traditional root.)

Digital reduction is an extremely simple numerical technique, involving nothing besides single-digit additions and neglect of decimal magnitude. A multi-digit number is treated as a string of single digit additions, and the process is reiterated in the case of a multi-digit result.

Expressing the series of binary powers in decimal notation yields the familiar sequence 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, 512, 1024, 2048, 4096, 8192 … When this series is compressed to a string of single digits by reduction, it proceeds: 1, 2, 4, 8, (1 + 6 =) 7, (3 + 2 =) 5, (6 + 4 =) 1, (1 + 2 + 8 = 11 = 1 + 1 =) 2, (2 + 5 + 6 = 13 = 1 + 3 =) 4, (5 + 1 + 2 =) 8, (1 + 0 + 2 + 4 =) 7, (2 + 0 + 4 + 8 = 14 = 1 + 4 =) 5, and repeatedly, through the 6-step cycle 1, 2, 4, 8, 7, 5. This process exposes the arithmetical necessity of the Yi Jing hexagram, as an archetypal exhaustion of the phases of time.

To excavate the triadic or tripodic, it is helpful to turn to the classical (and now integral) Confucian commentary, the 'Ten Wings' (Shi Yi), which explore the structure of the trigrams and hexagrams in various ways. These include an explicit formula for folding the six lines of the hexagram back into a triad, by coupling the lines: first and fourth; second and fifth; third and sixth. These dyads have a consistent arithmetical order, when calculated in accordance with the reduced bino-decimal values generated above: 1 + 8 = 9; 2 + 7 = 9; 4 + 5 = 9. "What these six lines show is simply this, the way of the three Powers."

Summation to nine regularly serves as a confirmation within the Shi Yi. For instance, in the section translated by Legge as 'The Great Appendix':

52. The numbers (required) for Khien (or the undivided line) amount to 216; those for Khwan (or the divided line), to 144. Together they are 360, corresponding to the days of the year.
53. The number produced by the lines in the two parts (of the Yî) amount to 11,520, corresponding to the number of all things.
54. Therefore by means of the four operations is the Yî completed. It takes 18 changes to form a hexagram.

144 = 1 + 4 + 4 = 9

216 = 2 + 1 + 6 = 9

360 = 3 + 6 + 0 = 9

11,520 = 1 + 1 + 5 + 2 + 0 = 9

18 = 1 + 8 = 9

There is much more to say on the importance of the number nine in traditional Chinese culture, and beyond, but this is not the time. For now, it suffices to note that nine, or 'Old Yang', represents the extreme point of maturity or positive accumulation in the Yi Jing, and thus incipient transition. It thus

echoes the function of the same numeral within a zero-based decimal place-value system, strongly reinforcing the impression that the Yi Jing assumes cultural familiarity with such numeracy, and thus indicating its extreme antiquity within China.

The six-phase cycle collapses into a triadic dynamic, whose stages are the dyads 1&8, 2&7, 4&5. It is thus exactly isomorphic with the paper, scissors, stone circuit, or rather, this latter can be seen as a simplification of the Yi Jing dynamic tripod, treating each stage as simple, rather than twinned. Where the bagua, or set of trigrams, merely enumerates the set of 3-bit variants in static fashion, the system of hexagrams rigorously constructs a triangular dynamic, which is presented as a model of time.

If this is the 'Chinese example' at its most quintessential, then it is exactly the Anglosphere example, as determined by Mead, except carried to a far more exalted level of abstraction, or proto-conceptual purity. Dynamic pluralism is under no threat from a Chinese future, insofar as deep-cultural evidence counts for anything. The reign of the tripod has scarcely begun.

Calendric Dominion

SEPTEMBER 30, 2011

How hegemony still counts.

Modernity and hegemony are Urban Future obsessions, which might (at least in part) excuse a link to this article in Britain's Daily Mail, on the topic of Christianity, the calendar, and political correctness. It addresses itself to the international dominion of the Gregorian, Western Christian calendar, and the sensitivities of those who, whilst perhaps reconciled to the inevitability of counting in Jesus-years, remain determined to dis-evangelize the accompanying acronymics. More particularly, it focuses upon the BBC, and its attempt to sensitize on other people's behalf (pass the popcorn).

The BBC's religious and ethics department says the changes are necessary to avoid offending non-Christians.

It states: 'As the BBC is committed to impartiality it is appropriate that we use terms that do not offend or alienate non-Christians.

In line with modern practice, BCE/CE (Before Common Era/Common Era) are used as a religiously neutral alternative to BC/AD.'

But the move has angered Christians …

Cue Ann Widdecombe, the Catholic former Tory Minister, who said: 'I think what the BBC is doing is offensive to Christians. They are discarding terms that have been around for centuries and are well understood by everyone.

'What are they going to do next? Get rid of the entire calendar on the basis that it has its roots in Christianity?'

It's an interesting question, and the attempt to hold it open, as provocatively as possible, might be the best reason to avoid glib, politically correct remedies to the 'problem', however that is understood. Anno Domini reminds us of dominion, which is a

far better guideline into historical reality than kumbaya gestures towards a 'Common Era', as if hegemony had no content beyond togetherness. Since dominion has not been achieved primarily by impoliteness or insensitivity, politically correct multiculturalism is an irrelevant (and dishonest) response to it.

Regardless of whether Jesus is your Lord, or not, the Christian calendar dominates, or at least predominates, and the traditional acronymic accurately registers that fact. AD bitchez, as the commentators of Zerohedge might say.

It is an intriguing and ineluctable paradox of globalized modernity that its approximation to universality remains fundamentally structured by ethno-geographical peculiarities of a distinctly pre-modern type. The world was not integrated by togetherness, but by a succession of particular powers, with their characteristic traits, legacies, and parochialisms. For better or for worse, these peculiar features have been deeply installed in the governing order of the world. Their signs should be meticulously conserved and studied rather than clumsily effaced, because they are critical clues to the real nature of fate.

Without exception, calendars are treasure troves of intricately-sedimented ethno-historical information. They attempt to solve an ultimately insoluble problem, by arithmetically rationalizing

irrational astronomical quantities, most obviously the incommensurable cycles of the terrestrial orbit (solar year), lunar orbit (month), and terrestrial rotation (day). No coherent arithmetical construct can ever reconcile these periods, and even a repulsively inelegant calendar can only do so to a tolerable margin or error. The consequent ramshackle compromise, typically deformed by a torturous series of adjustments, reshufflings, and intercalations, tells an elaborate story of fixed and variable cultural priorities, regime changes, legacy constraints, alien influences, conceptual capabilities, and observational refinements, further complicated by processes of drift, adoption, and innovation that ripple through numerical and linguistic signs.

The hegemonic (Gregorian) calendar, for instance, is a jagged time-crash of incommensurable periods, in which multiple varieties of disunity jostle together. Weeks don't fit into solar and lunar months, or years, but cut through them quasi-randomly, so that days and dates slide drunkenly across each other. The length of the week is biblical, but the names of the days combine ancient astrology (Saturday-Monday) with the gods of Norse mythology (Tuesday-Friday). Although the Nordic-linguistic aspect of the week has not been strongly globalized, its Judaeo-numerical aspect has. The months are a ghastly mess, awkwardly mismatched with each other, with the

lunar cycle, and with the succession of weeks, and testifying to the confused, erratic astro-politics of the Roman Empire in their linguistic mixture of deities (January, March, April?, May, June), festivals (February), emperors (July, August), and numbers (September-December). There is no need to excavate into this luxuriant dung-hill here, except to note that the 'Christianity' of the Western calendar rests upon chaos-rotted pagan and poly-numeric foundations.

What matters to the AD-BC (vs CE-BCE) debate is not the multitudinously-muttering inner disorder of the Western calendar, but its estimation of the years, or 'era'. In this regard, it has clear competitors, and thus arouses definite resentments, since its closest cousins assert eras of their own. The era of the Hebrew calendar dates back to the tohu (chaos) of the year before creation, and records the years of the world (Latinized as Anno Mundi), to the present 5772 AM. The Islamic calendar, which begins from the Hejira of Mohammed, from Mecca to Medina, reached 1432 AH in AD 2011.

The Christian calendar, first systematized in AD 525 by Dionysius Exiguus (Dennis the Runt), counts the first Anno Domini Nostri Iesu Christi as the birth year of Jesus Ben Joseph, a false messiah to the Jews, the Christ and Redeemer for the Christians, a prophet to the Moslems, the Nazarene

oppressor to Satanists, and something else, or nothing much, to everybody else. Regardless of the accuracy of its chronology or tacit theology, however, this is the year count that has been globally inherited from the real process of modernity, and recognized as a world standard by the United Nations, among other international organizations.

Compared to the Abrahamic calendars, those of Asia's demographic giants generally lacked tight doctrinal and didactic focus. India can usually be relied upon to inundate any topic whatsoever in delirious multiplicity, and the calendar is no exception. Bengali, Malayalam, and Tamil calendars are all widely used in their respective regions, the Indian National Calendar counts from AD 78 = 0, which, in ominous keeping with current events, places us in 1933, and the most widely accepted Hindu religious calendar total the years since the birth of Krishna, reaching 5112 in AD 2011.

The fabulous complexity of China's traditional calendar makes it a paradise for nerds. Most commonly, it counts the years of each imperial reign, and is thus integrated by a literary narrative of dynastic history, rather than an arithmetical continuum. (The obstacle this presented to modernistic universalization is brutally obvious.) Alternatively, however, it groups historical time into sixty-year cycles, beginning from 2637 BC (which places us in

the 28th year of cycle-78). Most Chinese today seem to have an extremely tenuous connection to this dimension of their calendrical heritage, which scarcely survives outside academic departments of ancient history, and in Daoist temples. Whilst the internal structure of the traditional year survives undamaged, as attested by the annual cycle of festivities, Chinese surrender to the Gregorian year count seems absolute.

Christian conservatives are surely right to argue that it is the year count – the number and the era – that matters. The acronyms are merely explanatory, and even essentially tautological. Once it has been decided that history is measured from and divided by the birth of Jesus, it is far too late to quibble over the attribution of dominance. AD bitchez. That argument is over.

(Coming next, in Part 2 – Counter-calendars)

Calendric Dominion (Part 2)

OCTOBER 8, 2011

Caesar with the soul of Christ.

Political Correctness has tacitly legislated against the still-prevailing acronyms that define the hegemonic international calendar (BC-AD), and proposed clear alternatives (BCE-CE). Both the criticism and the suggestion are entirely consistent with its principles. In accordance with the tenets of multiculturalism (a more recent and also more active hegemony), it extends the liberal assumption of formal equality from individuals to 'cultures', allocating group rights, and identifying – whilst immediately denouncing – discrimination and privilege. As might be expected from an ideology that is exceptionally concentrated among intellectual elites, the proposed remedy is purely symbolic, taking the form of a rectification of signs. The

'problem' is diagnosed as a failure of consciousness, or sensitivity, requiring only a raising of awareness (to be effected, one can safely assume, by properly credentialed and compensated professionals).

Even considered in its own terms, however, the rectification that is suggested amounts to nothing more than an empty gesture of refusal, accompanying fundamental compliance. Whilst the symbolic 'left' draw comfort from the insistence upon inconsequential change, with its intrinsic offense against conservative presumptions, reinforced by an implied moral critique of tradition, the counter-balancing indignation of the 'right' fixes the entire dispute within the immobilized trenches of the Anglo-American 'culture war'. The deep structure of calendric signs persists unaffected. Between Christian dominion (invoking 'Our Lord') and a 'common era' that is obediently framed by the dating of Christian revelation, there is no difference that matters. It is the count that counts.

Political Correctness fails here in the same way it always does, due to its disconnection of 'correctness' from any rigorous principle of calculation, and its disengagement of 'sensitivity' from realistic perception. A calendar is a profound cultural edifice, orchestrating the apprehension of historical time. As

such, it is invulnerable to the gnat-bites of ideological irritability (and dominance is not reducible to impoliteness).

The problem of Western Calendric Dominion is not one of supremacism (etiquette) but of supremacy (historical fatality). It might be posed: How did modernistic globalization come to be expressed as Christian Oecumenon? In large measure, this is Max Weber's question, and Walter Russell Mead's, but it overflows the investigations of both, in the direction of European and Middle Eastern antiquity. Initial stimulation for this inquiry is provided by a strange – even fantastic — coincidence.

In his notebooks, Friedrich Nietzsche imagined the overman (Übermensch) as a "Caesar with the soul of Christ," a chimerical being whose tensions echo those of the Church of Rome, Latinized Christian liturgy, and the Western calendar. This hybridity is expressed by a multitude of calendric features, following a broad division of labor between a Roman structuring of the year (within which with superficially-Christianized pagan festivals are scattered unsystematically), and a Christian year count, but it also points towards a cryptic — even radically unintelligible — plane of fusion.

In the Year Zero, which never took place, a mysterious synchronization occurred, imperceptibly and unremarked, founding the new theopolitical calendric order. For the Christians, who would not assimilate the Empire until the reign of Constantine in the early-4th century AD, God was incarnated as man, in the embryo of Jesus Christ. Simultaneously, in a Rome that was perfectly oblivious to the conception of the Messiah, the Julian calendar became operational. Julius Caesar's calendric reform had begun 45 years earlier, following the Years of Confusion, but incompetent execution in subsequent decades had systematically mis-timed the leap year, intercalating a day every three years, rather than every four. The anomalous triennial cycle was abandoned and "the Roman calendar was finally aligned to the Julian calendar in 1 BC (with AD 1 the first full year of alignment)," although no special significance would be assigned to these years until Dionysius Exiguus integrated Christian history in AD 525.

Given the astounding neglect of this twin event, some additional emphasis is appropriate: The Julian calendar, which would persist, unmodified, for almost 1,600 years, and which still dominates colloquial understanding of the year's length (at 365.25 days), was born – by sheer and outrageous 'chance' – at the precise origin of the Christian Era, as registered by the Western, and now international, numbering of historical time.

The year count thus exactly simulates a commemoration of the calendar itself – or at least of its prototype – even though the birth of this calendar, whether understood in the terms of secular reason or divine providence, has absolutely no connection to the counted beginning. This is a coincidence – which is to say, a destiny perceived without comprehension – that neither Roman authority nor Christian revelation has been able to account for, even as it surreptitiously shapes Western (and then Global) history. As the world's dominant calendar counts the years under what appears to be a particular religious inspiration, it refers secretly to its own initiation, alluding to mysteries of time that are alien to any faith. That much is simple fact.

Unlike the Julian calendar, the Gregorian calendar was determined under Christian auspices, or at least formal Christian authority (that of Pope Gregory XIII), and promulgated by papal bull in 1582. Yet a glance suffices to reveal the continuation of Julian calendric dominion, since the Gregorian reform effects transformations that remain strictly compliant with the Julian pattern, modified only by elementary operations of decimal re-scaling and inversion. Where the Julian calendar took four years as its base cyclical unit, the Gregorian takes four centuries, and where the Julian adds one leap day in four years, the Gregorian leaves one and subtracts three in 400. The result

was an improved approximation to the tropical year (averaging ~365.24219 days), from the Julian 365.25 year, to the Gregorian 365.2425, a better than 20-fold reduction in discrepancy from an average ~0.00781 days per year (drifting off the seasons by one day every 128 years) to ~0.00031 (drifting one day every 3,226 years).

The combination of architectonic fidelity with technical adjustment defines conservative reform. It is clearly evident in this case. A neo-Julian calendar, structured in its essentials at its origin in AD 1 minus 1, but technically modified at the margin in the interest of improved accuracy, armed the West with the world's most efficient large-scale time-keeping system by the early modern period. In China, where the Confucian literati staged competitions to test various calendars from around the world against the prediction of eclipses, Jesuits equipped with the Gregorian calendar prevailed against all alternatives, ensuring the inexorable trend towards Western calendric conventions, or, at least, the firm identification of Western methods with modernistic efficiency. Given only an edge, in China and elsewhere, the dynamics of complex systems took over, as 'network effects' locked-in the predominant standard, whilst systematically marginalizing its competitors. Even though Year Zero was still missing, it was, ever increasingly, missing at the same time for everyone. "Caeser with the soul of Christ" – the

master of Quadrennium and eclipse — had installed itself as the implicit meaning of world history.

(Still to come – in Part 4? – Counter-Calendars, but we probably need an excursion through zero first)

Calendric Dominion (Part 3)

OCTOBER 16, 2011

In Search of Year Zero.

A Year Zero signifies a radical re-beginning, making universal claims. In modern, especially recent modern times, it is associated above all with ultra-modernist visions of total politics, at is maximum point of utopian and apocalyptic extremity. The existing order of the world is reduced to nothing, from which a new history is initiated, fundamentally disconnected from anything that occurred before, and morally indebted only to itself. Predictably enough, among conservative commentators (in the widest sense), such visions are broadly indistinguishable from the corpse-strewn landscapes of social catastrophe, haunted by the ghosts of unrealizable dreams.

Christianity's global Calendric Dominion is paradoxical — perhaps even 'dialectical' — in this regard. It provides the governing model of historical rupture and unlimited ecumenical extension, and thus of total revolution, whilst at the same time representing the conservative order antagonized by modernistic ambition. Its example incites the lurch to Year Zero, even as it has no year zero of its own. Ultimately, its dialectical provocation tends towards Satanic temptation: the promise of Anti-Christian Apocalypse, or absolute news to a second power. ("If the Christians could do it, why couldn't we?" Cue body-counts scaling up towards infinity.)

This tension exists not only between an established Christian order and its pseudo-secular revolutionary after-image, but also within Christianity itself, which is split internally by the apparent unity and real dissociation of 'messianic time'. The process of Christian calendric consolidation was immensely protracted. A distance of greater than half a millennium separated the clear formulation of the year count from the moment commemorated, with further centuries required to fully integrate historical recording on this basis, digesting prior Jewish, Roman, and local date registries, and laying the foundation for a universalized Christian articulation of time. By the time the revolutionary 'good news' had been coherently formalized into a recognizable prototype of the hegemonic Western calendar, it

had undergone a long transition from historical break to established tradition, with impeccable conservative credentials.

Simultaneously, however, the process of calendric consolidation sustained, and even sharpened, the messianic expectation of punctual, and truly contemporary rupture, projected forwards as duplication, or 'second coming' of the initial division. Even if the moment in which history had been sundered into two parts — before and after, BC and AD — now lay in quite distant antiquity, its example remained urgent, and promissory. Messianic hope was thus torn and compacted by an intrinsic historical doubling, which stretched it between a vastly retrospective, gradually recognized beginning, and a prospect of sudden completion, whose credibility was assured by its status as repetition. What had been would be again, transforming the AD count into a completed sequence that was confirmed in the same way it was terminated (through Messianic intervention).

Unsurprisingly, the substantial history of Western calendric establishment is twinned with the rise of millenarianism, through phases that trend to increasingly social-revolutionary forms, and eventually make way for self-consciously anti-religious, although decidedly eschatological, varieties of modernistic total politics. Because whatever has happened must — at least — be possible, the very existence of the calendar supports anticipations of

absolute historical rupture. Its count, simply by beginning, prefigures an end. What starts can re-start, or conclude.

Zero, however, intrudes diagonally. It even introduces a comic aspect, since whatever the importance of the Christian revelation to the salvation of our souls, it is blatantly obvious that it failed to deliver a satisfactory arithmetical notation. For that, Christian Europe had to await the arrival of the decimal numerals from India, via the Moslem Middle East, and the ensuing revolution of calculation and book-keeping that coincided with the Renaissance, along with the birth of mercantile capitalism in the city states of northern Italy.

Indeed, for anybody seeking a truly modern calendar, the Arrival of Zero would mark an excellent occasion for a new year zero (AZ 0?), around AD 1500. Although this would plausibly date the origin of modernity, the historical imprecision of the event counts against it, however. In addition, the assimilation of zero by germinal European (and thus global) capitalism was evidently gradual — if comparatively rapid — rather than a punctual 'revolutionary' transition of the kind commerorative calendric zero is optimally appropriate to. (If Year Zero is thus barred from the designation of its own world-historic operationalization, it is perhaps structurally doomed to misapplication and the production of disillusionment.)

The conspicuous absence of zero from the Western calendar (count), exposed in its abrupt jolt from 1 BC to AD 1, is an intolerable and irreparable stigma that brings its world irony to a zenith. In the very operation of integrating world history, in preparation for planetary modernity, it remarks its own debilitating antiquity and particularity, in the most condescending modern sense of the limited and the primitive — crude, defective and underdeveloped.

How could a moment of self-evident calculative incompetence provide a convincing origin-point for subsequent historical calculation? Year Zero escaped all possibility of conceptual apprehension at the moment in the time-count where it is now seen to belong, and infinity (the reciprocal of zero) proves no less elusive. Infinity was inserted into a time when (and place where) it demonstrably made no sense, and the extraordinary world-historical impression that it made did nothing — not even nothing– to change that situation. Is this not a worthy puzzle for theologians? Omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, yet hopeless at maths — these are not the characteristics of a revelation designed to impress technologists or accountants. All the more reason, then, to take this comedy seriously, in all its ambivalence — since the emerging world of technologists and accountants, the techno-commercial (runway-industrial, or

capitalist) world that would globalize the earth, was weaned within the playpen of this calendar, and no other. Modernity had selected to date itself in a way that its own kindergarten students would scorn.

Calendric Dominion (Part 4)

OCTOBER 21, 2011

A Digression into the Reality Principle.

Between the world we would like to inhabit, and the world that exists, there's a gap that tests us. Even the simplest description of this gap already calls for a decision. 'Ideologies' in the broadest, and culturally almost all-consuming sense, serve primarily to soften it. Sense, and even compassion, is attributed to the side of reality, promising ultimate reconciliation between human hopes and desires and the 'objective' nature of things. Science, a typically despised and misanthropic discipline, tends to the opposite assumption, emphasizing the harsh indifference of reality to human interests and expectations, with the implication that the lessons it teaches us can be administered with unlimited brutality. We can dash ourselves against reality if we insist, but we cannot realistically anticipate some merciful moderation of the consequences. Nature does not scold or punish, it merely breaks us, coldly, upon the rack of our untruths.

Like other cultural institutions, calendars are saturated with ideologies, and tested to destruction against implacable reality. Their collision with nature is especially informative, because they express obstinate human desires as favored numbers (selected from among small positive integers), and they register the gulf of the real in a strictly quantitative form. Any surviving calendar relates the story of an adaptation to reality, or cultural deference to (and deformation by) nature, as numerical preferences have been compromised through their encounter with quantitative facts.

Pure ideology in the calendrical sphere is represented in its perfection by the fantasy year of the ancient Mesopotamians, 360 days in length, and harmonized to the sexagesimal (modulus-60) arithmetic of the Sumerians. Its influence has persisted in the 360 degrees of the geometric circle, and in the related sexagesimal division into minutes and seconds (of time and arc). The archaic calendars of Meso-America and East Asia, as well as those of the Middle East, seem to have been attracted to the 360-day year, as though to an ideal model. If the Great Architect of the Universe had been an anthropomorphic geometer, this is the calendar that would work.

Of course, it doesn't (with all due respect to the engrossing Biblical counter-argument outlined here). Instead, in the

mainstream world calendric tradition – as determined by the eventual global outcome – a first level adaptation systematized the year at 365 days – the Egyptian year. Unlike the 360-day archetypal year, which has all of the first three primes as factors, and thus divides conveniently into 'months' or other component periods, the 365-day year represents a reluctant concession to quantitative fact. The number 365 has only two factors (both primes, 5 and 73), but neither seems to have acquired any discernible calendrical valency, perhaps because of their obvious unsuitability to even approximate description of lunar periods. The Egyptians turned instead to an awkward but influential innovation: the intercalation. A five-day appendix was added to the year, as a sheer correction or supplementary commensuration, and an annual reminder of the gap between numerical elegance and astronomical reality. Whilst intercalations were invested with mytho-religious significance, this was essentially compensatory – a crudely obscured testament to the weakness of ideality (and thus of systematic priest-craft as a mode of reality apprehension, or efficient social purpose). If intercalations were necessary, then nature was not spell-bound, and the priest-masters of calendric time were exposed, tacitly, as purveyors of mystification, whose limits were drawn by the horizon of social credulity. Astronomical time mocked the meanings of men.

Over time, the real ('tropical') year discredits its calendrical idealizations by unmooring dates from the seasons, in a process of time drift that exposes discrepancy, and drives calendar reform. Inaccurate calendars are gradually rendered meaningless, as the seasonal associations of its time terms are eroded to utter randomness – by frigid 'summer' months and scorching 'winter' ones. Clearly, no priesthood can survive in a climate that derides the established order of the year, and in which farmers that listen to the holy words (of time) are assured inevitable starvation. Unless tracked within a tolerable margin of accuracy by a calendar that 'keeps' the time, the year reverts to an alien and unintelligible thing, entirely exterior to cultural comprehension, whilst society's reigning symbols appear as a risible, senseless babble, drowned out by the howling chaos of the real.

With the introduction of the Julian Calendar, coinciding with the (non-event) of year zero, comes the recognition that the tropical year is incommensurable with any integer, and that a larger cycle of intercalation is required to track it. A kind of modernity, or structural demystification, is born with the relinquishment of the ideal year, and everything it symbolizes in terms of cosmic design or celestial harmony. The devil's appendix is attached, irremovably.

Numeracy and time measurement divorce at the origin of caesarean Calendric Dominion, but it is easy to mistake accidents on this path for essential concessions to reality. Even allowing for the inescapable function of intercalations, there was nothing inevitable – at least absolutely or cosmically inevitable – about the utter ruination of numerical coherence that the Julian Calendar incarnated, and passed on.

To explore this (admittedly arcane) topic further requires a digression to the second power, into the relations between numbers and anthropomorphic desire. The obvious starting point is the 360-day calendar of ancient Sumer, and the question: What made this number appealing? Whether examining 360, or its sexagesimal root (60), an arithmetically-conventional attention to prime factors (2, 3, and 5), is initially misleading — although ultimately indispensable. A more illuminating introduction begins with the compound factors 10 and 12, the latter relevant primarily to the lunar cycle (and the archaic dream of an astronomically – or rather astrologically — consistent 12-month year), and the former reflecting the primordial anthropomorphism in matters numeric: decimalism. The 360-day calendar is an object of human desire because it is an anthropo-lunar (or menstrual-lycanthropic?) hybrid, speaking intrinsically to the cycles of human fertility, and to the 'digital'

patterns instantiated in mammalian body-plans. A 360-day year would be ours (even if alien things are hidden in it).

Anthropomorphic decimalism suggests how certain numerical opportunities went missing, along with zero. 'Apprehension' and 'comprehension' refer understanding to the prehensile organs of a specific organism, whose bilateral symmetry combines five-fingered hands to produce a count reaching ten, across an interval that belongs to an alien, intractable, third. Triadic beings are monsters, and decimally ungraspable. The bino-decimal structure of the Yi Jing exhibits this with total clarity, through its six-stage time-cycle that counts in the recurrent sequence 1, 2, 4, 8, 7, 5 … Each power of three (within the decimal numerals) is expelled along with zero from the order of apprehensible time. There is no way that a ternary calendric numeracy could ever have been anthropomorphically acceptable – the very thought is (almost definitionally) abominable.

Yet astronomy seems hideously complicit with abomination, at least, if the years are twinned. The sixth power of three (3^6) approximates to the length of two tropical years with a discrepancy of just ~1.48438 days, or less than one day a year. An intercalation of three days every four years (or two twin-year cycles) brings it to the accuracy of the Julian Calendar, and a reduction of this intercalation by one day every 128 years (or 64

(2^6) twin-year cycles) exceeds the accuracy of the Gregorian calendar.

It might be necessary to be slightly unbalanced to fully appreciate this extraordinary conjunction of numerical elegance and astronomical fact. A system of calendric computation that counts only in twos and threes, and which maintains a perfectly triadic order of time-division up to the duration of a two-year period, is able to quite easily exceed the performance of the dominant international calendar (reaching a level of accuracy that disappears into the inherent instability of the tropical year, and is thus strictly speaking unimprovable).

How many days are there in a year? ((3 x 3 x 3 x 3 x 3 x 3) / 2) + ~0.74219

The horror, the horror …

Calendric Dominion (Part 5)

OCTOBER 28, 2011

From Crimson Paradise to Soft Apocalypse.

Despite its modernity and decimalism, the French calendrier républicain or révolutionnaire had no Year Zero, but it re-set the terms of understanding. A topic that had been conceived as an intersection of religious commemoration with astronomical fact became overtly ideological, and dominated by considerations of secular politics. The new calendar, which replaced AD 1792 with the first year of the new 'Era of Liberty', lasted for less than 14 years. It was formally abolished by Napoléon, effective from 1 January 1806 (the day after 10 Nivôse an XIV), although it was briefly revived during the Paris Commune (in AD 1871, or Année 79 de la République), when the country's revolutionary enthusiasm was momentarily re-ignited.

For the left, the calendric re-set meant radical re-foundation, and symbolic extirpation of the Ancien Régime. For the right, it meant immanentization of the eschaton, and the origination of totalitarian terror. Both definitions were confirmed in 1975, when Year Zero was finally reached in the killing fields of the Kampuchean Khmer Rouge, where over quarter of the country's population perished during efforts to blank-out the social slate and start over. Khmer Rouge leader Saloth Sar (better known by his nom de guerre Pol Pot) had made 'Year Zero' his own forever, re-branded as a South-east Asian final solution.

Year Zero was henceforth far too corpse-flavored to retain propaganda value, but that does not render the calendric equation 1975 = 0 insignificant (rather the opposite). Irrespective of its parochialism in time and space, corresponding quite strictly to a re-incarnation of (xenophobic-suicidal) 'national socialism', it defines a meaningful epoch, as the high-water mark of utopian overreach, and the complementary re-valorization of conservative pragmatism. Appropriately enough, Year Zero describes an instant without duration, in which the age of utopian time is terminated in exact coincidence with its inauguration. The era it opens is characterized, almost perfectly, by its renunciation, as fantasy social programming extinguishes

itself in blood and collapse. The immanent eschaton immediately damns itself.

Historical irony makes this excursion purely (sub-) academic, because the new era is essentially disinclined to conceive itself as such. What begins from this Year Zero is a global culture of ideological exhaustion, or of 'common sense', acutely sensitive to the grinning death's head hidden in beautiful dreams, and reconciled to compromise with the non-ideal. From the perspective of fantastic revolutionary expectation, the high-tide of perfectionist vision ebbs into disillusionment and tolerable dissatisfaction – but at least it doesn't eat our children. The new era's structural modesty of ambition has no time for a radical re-beginning or crimson paradise, even when it is historically defined by one.

Pol Pot's Year Zero is sandwiched between the publication of Eric Voegelin's The Ecumenic Age (1974), and the first spontaneous Chinese mass protests against the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (over the months following the death of Zhou Enlai, in January 1976). It is noteworthy in this regard that Deng Xiaoping eulogized Zhou at his memorial ceremony for being "modest and prudent" (thus the New Aeon speaks).

In the Anglo-American world, the politics of ideological exhaustion were about to take an explicitly conservative form, positively expressed as 'market realism' (and in this sense deeply resonant with, as well as synchronized to, Chinese developments). Margaret Thatcher assumed leadership of the British Conservative Party in February 1975, and Ronald Reagan declared his presidential candidacy in November of the same year. The English-speaking left would soon be traumatized by a paradoxical 'conservative revolution' that extracted relentless energy from the very constriction of political possibility. What could not happen quickly became the primary social dynamo, as articulated by the Thatcherite maxim: "There is no alternative" (= option zero). The auto-immolation of utopia had transmuted into a new beginning.

Whilst the era of not restarting from zero can be dated to approximate accuracy (from AD n – 1975), and had thus in fact restarted from zero, in profoundly surreptitious fashion, its broad consequence was to spread and entrench (Gregorian) Calendric Dominion ever more widely and deeply. The prevailing combination of radically innovative globalization (both economic and technological) with prudential social conservatism made such an outcome inevitable. Symbolic re-commencement wasn't on anybody's agenda, and even as the postmodernists declared the end of 'grand narratives', the first

planetary-hegemonic narrative structure in history was consolidating its position of uncontested monopoly. Globalization was the story of the world, with Gregorian dating as its grammar.

Orphaned by ideological exhaustion, stigmatized beyond recovery by its association with the Khmer Rouge, and radically maladapted to the reigning spirit of incremental pragmatism, by the late 20th century Year Zero was seemingly off the agenda, unscheduled, and on its own. Time, then, for something truly insidious.

On January 18, 1985, Usenet poster Spencer L. Bolles called attention to a disturbing prospect that had driven a friend into insomnia:

I have a friend that raised an interesting question that I immediately tried to prove wrong. He is a programmer and has this notion that when we reach the year 2000, computers will not accept the new date. Will the computers assume that it is 1900, or will it even cause a problem? I violently opposed this because it seemed so meaningless. Computers have entered into existence during this century, and has software, specifically accounting software, been prepared for this turnover? If this

really comes to pass and my friend is correct, what will happen? Is it anything to be concerned about?

Bolles' anonymous friend was losing sleep over what would come to be known as the 'Y2K problem'. In order to economize on memory in primitive early-generation computers, a widely-adopted convention recorded dates by two digits. The millennium and century were ignored, since it was assumed that software upgrades would have made the problem moot by the time it became imminent, close to the 'rollover' (of century and millennium) in the year AD 2000. Few had anticipated that the comparative conservatism of software legacies (relative to hardware development) would leave the problem entirely unaddressed even as the crisis date approached.

In the end, Y2K was a non-event that counted for nothing, although its preparation costs, stimulus effects (especially on outsourcing to the emerging Indian software industry), and panic potential were all considerable. Its importance to the history of the calendar – whilst still almost entirely virtual – is extremely far-reaching.

Y2K resulted from the accidental — or 'spontaneous' — emergence of a new calendrical order within the globalized technosphere. Its Year Zero, 0K (= 1900), was devoid of all

parochial commemoration or ideological intention, even as it was propagated through increasingly computerized communication channels to a point of ubiquity that converged, asymptotically, with that attained by Western Calendric Dominion over the complete sweep of world history. The 20th century had been recoded, automatically, as the 1st century of the Cybernetic Continuum. If Y2K had completed its reformatting of the planetary sphere-drive in the way some (few deluded hysterics) had expected, the world would now be approaching the end of the year 0K+111, settled securely in its first arithmetically-competent universal calendar, and historically oriented by the same system of electronic computation that had unconsciously decided upon the origin of positive time. Instead, the 'millennium bug' was fixed, and theological date-counting prolonged its dominance, uninterrupted (after much ado about nothing). Most probably, the hegemonic cultural complex encrusted in Calendric Dominion never even noticed the cybernetic insurrection it had crushed.

Between 0K and Y2K, the alpha and omega of soft apocalypse, there is not only a century of historical time, but also an inversion of attitude. Time departs 0K, as from any point of origin, accumulating elapsed duration through its count. Y2K, in contrast, was a destination, which time approached, as if to an apocalyptic horizon. Whilst not registered as a countdown, it

might easily have been. The terminus was precisely determined (no less than the origin), and the strictest formulation of the millennium bug construed the rollover point as an absolute limit to recordable time, beyond which no future was even imaginable. For any hypothetical Y2K-constrained computer intelligence, denied access to dating procedures that over-spilled its two-digit year registry, residual time shrank towards zero as the millennium event loomed. Once all the nines are reached, time is finished, at the threshold of eternity, where beginning and end are indistinguishable (in 0).

"0K, it's time to wrap this puppy up." – Revelation 6:14

(next, and last, the end (at last))

Calendric Dominion (Part 6)

NOVEMBER 4, 2011

Countdown.

At the beginning of the 21st century, global cultural hegemony is on the move. For roughly 500 years, Western — and later more specifically Anglophone — societies and agencies have predominantly guided the development of the current world system. As their economic pre-eminence wanes, their cultural and political influence can be expected to undergo a comparable decline. In the early stages of the coming transition, however, the terminal form of active Western cultural hegemony – multicultural political correctness (MPC) – is well-positioned to manage the terms of the retreat. By reconfiguring basic Western religious and political themes as a systematic sensitization to unwarranted privilege, MPC is able to distance itself from its

own heritage and to live on, in the resentment of 'the other', as if it were the neutral adjudicator of disputes it had no part in.

When MPC turns its attention to the Gregorian (or Western Christian) Calendar it is, of course, appalled. But it is also stuck. What could be more insensitive to cultural diversity than an ecumenical date-counting system, rooted in the ethnic peculiarities of Greek-phase Abrahamic religion, which unapologetically celebrates its triumph in the uncompromising words Anno Domini? Yet global convergence demands a standard, no alternative calendar has superior claims to neutrality, and, in any case, the inertial juggernaut of large-scale complex systems – 'lock-in' or 'path-dependency' – pose barriers to switching that seem effectively insuperable. The solution proposed by MPC to this conundrum is so feeble that it amounts to the completion of Gregorian Calendric Dominion, which is to be simultaneously rephrased (politely) and acknowledged in its irresistible universality as the articulation of a 'Common Era'.

MPC supplants problems of cultural power with obfuscatory etiquette, and in absolute terms, its smug dishonesty is difficult to like. As a relative phenomenon, however, its appeal is more obvious, since radical 'solutions' to Gregorian Calendric Dominion, re-beginning at Year Zero, have generally reverted to

mass murder. Lacking persuasive claims to a new, fundamental, and universally acknowledged historical break, they have substituted terror for true global singularity, as if fate could be blotted out in blood.

Since resentment gets nowhere, whether in its mild (MPC) or harsh (killing fields) variants, it is worth entertaining alternative possibilities. These begin with attention to real cultural differences, rather than mere 'cultural diversity' as it presents itself to the vacuously MPC-processed mind. Soon after Shanghai had been selected as host city for World Expo 2010 (in December 2002), countdowns started. For Westerners, these probably had space-age associations, triggering memories of the countdowns to 'blast off' that were popularized by the Apollo Program, and subsequent science fiction media. It is far from impossible that Chinese shared in these evocations, although they were also able to access a far deeper – which is to say civilizationally fundamental – reservoir of reference. That is because Chinese time typically counts down, modeled, as it is, on the workings of water clocks. The Chinese language systematically describes previous as 'above' (shang) and next as 'beneath' (xia), conforming to an intuition of time as descent. Time is counted down as it runs out, from an elevated hydraulic body into the sunken future that receives it.

Duration not only flows, it drips. Perhaps, then, an 'orientalization' of calendric perception and organization is something that significantly exceeds a simple (or even exceedingly difficult) renegotiation of beginnings. Re-beginning might be considered largely irrelevant to the problem, at least when compared to the re-orientation from an original to a terminal Year Zero. Whilst not exactly a transition in the direction of time, such a change would involve a transition in the direction of time intuition, simultaneously surpassing the wildest ambitions of calendrical re-origination and subtly organizing itself 'within the pores' of the established order of time. As modeled by the 2010 Expo, and previously by Y2K, the switch to countdown time does not frontally challenge, or seek to straightforwardly replace, the calendric order in being. Rather than counting in the same way, from a different place, it counts in a different way, within the framework of time already in place. It is a revolution with 'Chinese characteristics', which is to say: a surreptitious insurgency, changing what something already was, rather than replacing it with something else.

Both the 2010 Expo and Y2K also reveal the extreme difficulty of any such transition, since a futural Year Zero, or countdown calendar, must navigate the arrow of time and its cognitive asymmetry (between knowledge of the past and of the future), presupposing exact, confident, and consensual prediction.

That is why it approximates so closely to conservative acceptance. If the countdown is to be sure of arriving at the scheduled terminus, the destination 'event' must already be a date (rather than an empirical 'happening'). Nothing will suffice except a strictly arithmetical, rigorously certain inevitability, as inescapably pre-destined as the year 2000, or 2010, which cannot but come. From the perspective of the countdown calendar, that is what (Gregorian) Calendric Dominion will have been for. It is an opportunity to program an inevitable arrival.

But when? The sheer passage (fall) of time has assured that the opportunity for calendric revolution presented by the Y2K 'millennium bug' has been irretrievably missed (so that AD 1900 ≠ 0). The same is true of World Expo 2010, an event without pretense to be anything beyond a miniature 'practice' model of global-temporal singularity. As for the real (techno-commercial) Singularity – that is an imprecise historical prediction, at once controversial and incapable of supporting exact prediction.

A more appropriate prospect is suggested by the science fiction writer Greg Bear, in his novel Queen of Angels, set in anticipation of the mid-21st century 'binary millennium' ($2048 = 2^{11}$). This is a formally suitable, purely calendric 'event', deriving its significance from arithmetic rather than ideology or uncertain

prophecy. He even envisages it as a moment of insurgent revolution, when artificial intelligence arises surreptitiously, and unnoticed. Yet arbitrariness impairs this date (why the 11th power of 2?), and no serious attempt is made to explain its rise to exceptional cultural prominence.

If an adjusted global culture is to converge upon a countdown date, it must be obvious, intrinsically compelling, and ideologically uncontroversial, in other words, spontaneously plausible. The target that World Expo 2010 suggests (anagrammatically) is AD 2100, a date that performs the final stages of a countdown (2, 1, 0 …). Reinforcing this indication, the Y2K 'millennium bug' threatened to re-set the date of AD 2000 to AD 1900, which would have tacitly reiterated itself at the exact end of the 21st century. If it continues to chatter about the calendar, perhaps this is how.

The impending Mayan Apocalypse, scheduled for 21 / 12 / 2012, offers a preliminary chance to indulge in a festival of countdown numbers – like 2010, it looks a lot like another digital singularity simulation. If the morning of December 22nd, 2012, leaves the world with nothing worse than a hangover, it could gradually settle into a new sense of the Years Remaining (to the end of all the time that counts, or the 21st century).

AD 2100 = 0 YR

AD 2099 = 1 YR

AD 2098 = 2 YR

AD 2096 = 4 YR

AD 2092 = 8 YR

AD 2084 = 16 YR

AD 2068 = 32 YR

AD 2036 = 64 YR

AD 1972 = 128 YR

AD 1844 = 256 YR

AD 1588 = 512 YR

AD 1076 = 1024 YR

AD 52 = 2048 YR

It's difficult to anticipate what it looks like from the other side.

Suspended Animation

NOVEMBER 11, 2011

Limbo starts to feel like home.

According to Herbert Stein's Law, the signature warning of our age, "If something cannot go on forever, it will stop." The question is: When?

The central concerns of environmentalists and radical market economists are easy to distinguish – when not straightforwardly opposed – yet both groups face a common mental and historical predicament, which might even be considered the outstanding social discovery of recent times: the extraordinary durability of the unsustainable. A pattern of mass behavior is observed that leads transparently to crisis, based on explosive (exponential) trends that are acknowledged without controversy, yet

consensus on matters of fact coexists with paralyzing policy disagreements, seemingly interminable procrastination, and irresolution. The looming crisis continues to swell, close, horribly close, but in no way that is persuasively measurable closer, like some grating Godot purgatory: "You must go on; I can't go on; I'll go on."

Urban Future doesn't do green anguish as well as teeth-grinding Austrolibertarian irritation, so it won't really try. Suffice to say that being green is about to become almost unimaginably maddening, if it isn't already. Just as the standard 'green house' model insinuates itself, near-universally, into the structure of common sense, the world temperature record has locked into a flatline, with surging CO2 production showing up everywhere except as warming. Worse still, a new wave of energy resources – stubbornly based on satanic hydrocarbons, and of truly stupefying magnitude – is rolling out inertially, with barely a hint of effective obstruction. Tar sands, fracking, and sub-salt deep sea oil deposits are all coming on-stream already, with methane clathrates just up the road. The world's on a burn, and it can't go on (but it carries on).

Financial unsustainability is no less blatant, or bizarrely enduring. Since the beginning of the 20th century, once (classically) liberal Western economies have seen government

expenditure rise from under 5% to over 40% of total income, with much of Europe crossing the 50% redline (after which nothing remotely familiar as 'capitalism' any longer exists). Public debt levels are tracing geometrically elegant exponential curves, chronic dependency is replacing productive social participation, and generalized sovereign insolvency is now a matter of simple and obvious fact. The only thing clearer than the inevitability of systemic bankruptcy is the political impossibility of doing anything about it, so things carry on, even though they really have to stop. Unintelligible multi-trillion magnitudes of impending calamity stack up, and up, and up in a near future which never quite arrives.

The frozen limbo-state of durable unsustainability is the new normal (which will last until it doesn't). The pop cultural expression is zombie apocalypse, a shambling, undying state of endlessly prolonged decomposition. When translated into economic analysis, the result is epitomized by Tyler Cowen's influential e-book The Great Stagnation: How America Ate All the Low-Hanging Fruit of Modern History, Got Sick, and Will (Eventually) Feel Better. (Yes, Urban Future is arriving incredibly late to this party, but in a frozen limbo that doesn't matter.)

In a nutshell, Cowen argues that the exhaustion of three principal sources of 'low-hanging fruit' has brought the secular trend of American growth to a state of stagnation that high-frequency business cycles have partially obscured. With the consumption of America's frontier surplus (free land), educational surplus (smart but educationally-unserved population), and — most importantly — technological surplus, from major breakthroughs opening broad avenues of commercial exploitation, growth rates have shriveled to a level that the country's people are psychologically unprepared to accept as normal.

It fell to Cowen's GMU colleague Peter Boettke to clearly make the pro-market case for stagnationism that Cowen seems to think he had already persuasively articulated. In an overtly supportive post, Boettke transforms Cowens' rather elusive argument into a far more pointed anti-government polemic — the discovery of a new depressive equilibrium, in which relentless socio-political degeneration absorbs and neutralizes a decaying trend of techno-economic advance.

An accumulated economic surplus was created by the age of innovation, which the age of economic illusion spent down. We are now coming to the end of that accumulated surplus and thus

the full weight of government inefficiencies are starting to be felt throughout the economy.

Perhaps surprisingly, the general tenor of response on the libertarian right was quite different. Rather than celebrating Cowen's exposure of the statist ruin visited upon Western societies, most of this commentary concentrated upon the stagnationist thesis itself, attacking it from a variety of interlocking angles. David R. Henderson's Cato review makes stinging economic arguments against Cowen's claims about land and education. Russ Roberts (at Cafe Hayek) shows how Cowen's dismal story about stagnant median family incomes draws upon data distorted by historical changes in US family structure and residential patterns. The most common line of resistance, however, instantiated by Don Boudreaux, John Hagel, Steven Horwitz, Bryan Caplan, and Ronald Bailey, among others, rallies in defense of actually existing consumer capitalism. Bailey, for example, notes:

In 1970, a 23-inch color television cost $368 ($2,000 in 2009 dollars). Today, a 22-inch Phillips LCD flat panel TV costs $190. In 1978, an 8-track tape player cost $169 ($550). Today, an iPod Touch with 8 gigabytes of memory costs $204. In 1970, an Olympia adding machine cost $80 ($437 in 2009 dollars). Today, a Canon office calculator costs $6.65. In 1978, a Radio Shack

TRS80 computer with 16K of RAM cost $399 ($1300 in 2009 dollars). Today, Costco will sell you an ASUS netbook with 1 gigabyte of RAM for $270. The average car cost $3,900 in 1970 ($21,300 in today's dollars). A mid-sized 2011 vehicle would cost somewhere around $20,000 and last twice as long.

Another very crude way to look at it is that Americans are four times richer in terms of refrigerators, 10 times richer in terms of TVs, 2.5 times richer when it comes to listening to music on the go, 3,000 times richer in calculators, about 400,000 times richer when it comes to price per kilobyte of computer memory, and two times richer in cars. Cowen dismisses this kind of progress as mere "quality improvements," but in this case quality becomes it own kind of quantity when it comes to improved living standards.

What seems pretty clear from most of this (and already in Cowen's account) is that nothing much has been moving forward in the world's 'developed' economies for four decades except for the information technology revolution and its Moore's Law dynamics. Abstract out the microprocessor, and even the most determinedly optimistic vision of recent trends is gutted to the point of expiration. Without computers, there's nothing happening, or at least nothing good.

[… still crawling …]

Suspended Animation (Part 2)

NOVEMBER 18, 2011

Whatever happened to hell?

> "It can't carry on like this … but how many weeks have we said that for?"
> — Justin Urquhart Stewart, director at Seven Investment Management (via James Pethokoukis here)

To make a protracted topic out of this phenomenon is to offer a hostage to fortune. Everything could go over the cliff tomorrow. Perhaps it already has (and we're just waiting, like Wile E. Coyote, for the consummating splatter).

Greens have been dealing with exactly this question, for a while. After Paul Ehrlich had his credibility torched by Julian Simon, in the most intellectually consequential wager in history, he responded in frustration: "The bet doesn't mean anything. Julian Simon is like the guy who jumps off the Empire State Building and says how great things are going so far as he passes the 10th floor."

If environmental catastrophe is structured like this, according to a pattern of durable unsustainability, or disconcerting postponement, there is no obvious theory to account for the fact. With economics, things are different, to such an extent that the entire political economy of the world, along with the overwhelming preponderance of professionalized economic 'science', has been geared over the course of a little under a century to crisis postponement as a dominant objective. If the New World Order follows a master plan, this is it.

For ideological purists on the free-market right, laissez-faire capitalism is the 'unknown ideal' (although early 20th century Shanghai approached it, as did its student, Hong Kong, in later decades), but it requires no purism whatsoever to acknowledge that the Great Depression effectively buried it as an organizing principle of the world, and that the system which replaced it found political and intellectual expression in the ideas of John

Maynard Keynes. Commercial self-organization, which built industrial capitalism before anyone had even the sketchiest understanding of what was happening, gave way to the technocracy of macroeconomics, guided by the radically original belief that governments had a responsibility to manage the oscillations of economic fortune.

In the words of Peter Thiel (drawn straight from the free-market id):

… the trend has been going the wrong way for a long time. To return to finance, the last economic depression in the United States that did not result in massive government intervention was the collapse of 1920–21. It was sharp but short, and entailed the sort of Schumpeterian "creative destruction" that could lead to a real boom. The decade that followed — the roaring 1920s — was so strong that historians have forgotten the depression that started it. The 1920s were the last decade in American history during which one could be genuinely optimistic about politics. Since 1920, the vast increase in welfare beneficiaries and the extension of the franchise to women — two constituencies that are notoriously tough for libertarians — have rendered the notion of "capitalist democracy" into an oxymoron.

As Cato's Daniel J. Mitchell puts it, more narrowly:

A vibrant and dynamic economy requires the possibility of big profits, but also the discipline of failure. Indeed, capitalism without bankruptcy is like religion without hell.

Because hell's a hard sell, political and economic rationality have been heading in different directions for 80 years. Even the tropical latitudes of purgatory have proven to be socially combustible, and popularly sensitized politics – which need not be formally 'democratic' – tend (strongly) to flee Molotov cocktails in the direction of macroeconomic management. The crucial Keynesian maxim, "In the long run we are all dead," is especially pertinent to regimes. Who's going to regenerate deep economic recovery, if the route to it lies through gulfs of fire and brimstone that are fundamentally incompatible with political survival? History, redundantly, provides the obvious answer: nobody is.

The accursed path not taken, across the infernal abyss, has become so neglected and overgrown with weeds that it is rarely noticed, but it is still graphically marked by the advice that Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon gave to Herbert Hoover as the way to navigate the Great Depression (advice that was, of course, dismissed):

… liquidate labor, liquidate stocks, liquidate farmers, liquidate real estate… it will purge the rottenness out of the system. High costs of living and high living will come down. People will work harder, live a more moral life. Values will be adjusted, and enterprising people will pick up from less competent people.

In recalling this recommendation, as an unacceptable option, Hoover commemorates the precise moment that capitalism ceased to exist as a politically credible social possibility. The alternative – which has many names, although 'corporatism' will do – was defined by its systematic refusal of the 'liquidationist' path. Coming out stronger on the other side meant nothing, because the passage would probably kill us – it would certainly destroy our political careers. In any case, it was a long run solution to a short term problem, scheduled by volatile popular irritability and election cycles, and in the long run we are all dead. Better, by far, to use 'macroeconomic policy' (monetary mind-control) to artificially prolong unsustainable economic euphoria – or even its jaded, hung-over simulation – than to plunge into a catastrophe that might imaginably have been delayed.

It doesn't take a Schumpeterian fanatic to suspect that such 'creative destruction (but without the destruction)' is unlikely to provide a sustainable recipe for economic vitality. When

evaluated realistically, it is a formula that programs a trend to perpetual stagnation. Stagnation as a choice.

Because money serves as a general equivalent, and thus as a neutral, non-specific, purely quantitative medium of exchange, it is very supportive of certain highly-consequential economic illusions, of a kind that macroeconomics has been especially prone to. It can easily seem as if 'the economy' consists essentially of undifferentiated, quantitative aggregates, such as 'demand', 'gross domestic product', 'money supply', 'land', 'labor', and 'capital'. In fact, none of these things exist, except as high-level abstractions, precipitated by the monetary function of general exchangeability.

An understanding of Schumpeterian creative destruction requires, as a preliminary, the recognition that capital is heterogeneous. When expressed in a monetary form, it can appear as a homogeneous quantity, susceptible to simple accumulation, but in its productive social reality it consists of technological apparatus – tools, machines, infrastructures, and installations – representing irretrievable investments, of qualitatively distinctive kinds. The monetary equivalent of such industrial capital is derived from the market values attributed its various components, and these are extremely dynamic, virtual, and speculative. Since the value retrievable from liquidation (and

ultimately from scrap) is generally a small fraction, or lower bound, of capital asset value, the 'capital stock' is estimated with reference to its productive usage, rather than its intrinsic worth. Schumpeter was careful to break this down into two very different aspects.

Firstly, and most straightforwardly, industrial capital is a resource that depreciates at a regular and broadly predictable rate as a function of output. It is consumed in the process of production, like any other material input, but at a slower rate. Creative destruction, however, refers to a second, far more drastic type of capital depreciation, resulting from technological obsolescence. In this case, capital stock is 'destroyed' – suddenly and unpredictably – by an innovation, taking place elsewhere in the economy, which renders its anticipated use unprofitable. In this way, large 'quantities' of 'accumulated' capital can be depreciated overnight to scrap values, and the investments they represent are annihilated. The hallucination of homogeneous capital is instantaneously vaporized, as painstakingly built fortunes are written down to nothing.

Several points suggest themselves:

1. The violence of creative destruction is directly proportional to its fecundity. The greater, deeper, and more far-reaching the

innovation, the more colossal is the resulting capital destruction. At the extreme, profound technological revolutions lay waste not only to specific machines and skills, but to entire infrastructures, industries, occupational categories, and financial systems.

2. The cultural implication of creative destruction far exceeds issues of 'moral hazard' and 'time preference'. The victims of industrial change waves – whether businesses, workers, or financiers – are not being punished by the market for imprudence, slackness, or short-sightedness. They are ruined by pure hazard, as the reciprocal of the absolutely unanticipated nature of technological invention (occurring elsewhere). Neither the creation, nor the destruction, is remotely 'fair' – or ever could be. (Although Dawinian 'virtue' lies in flexible adaptability — Hong Kong always does OK.)

3. Massive capital destruction expresses technological revolution. Macroeconomic analysis (measuring homogeneous aggregates) will always miss the most significant episodes in industrial evolution, since these do not register primarily as growth, but rather the opposite. Hell is a hothouse.

4. A policy environment designed to preserve macroeconomic aggregates (e.g. 'wealth' or 'employment') necessarily opposes

itself to the basic historical process of industrial revolution, because destruction of the existing economy is strictly indistinguishable from industrial renewal. For that old stuff to be worth anything (beyond scrap) we have to keep using it, which means that we're not switching over. To cross the gulf, we have to enter the gulf. (Like most things in this universe: harsh but true.)

5. Real historical advance is now politically unacceptable. Either politics wins (eternal stagnation) or history does (political collapse). Interesting times (or not).

The world couldn't take the heat, so it got out of the kitchen. There's cold porridge for dinner, and it's going to be cold porridge for breakfast. Eventually the porridge will run out, but that could take a while …

… and here's Ben Bernanke on topic: "I'm not a believer in the Old Testament theory of business cycles. I think that if we can help people, we need to help people." (via Mike Krieger at ZH)

Cold porridge politics forever. Yum!

Suspended Animation (Part 3)

NOVEMBER 25, 2011

The dead hand of the state.

I wish I was saying it's going to happen soon… this is the longest running crisis in which people have been giving false dates, people turning up for summits saying it has to be resolved, nothing happens and people go away and the sky doesn't fall in… sooner or later the sky will fall in, I'm just not clever enough to know when it's going to be.
— Anthony Fry, UK Chairman of Espirito Santo Investment Bank (to CNBC)

Europe will adopt the American solution. The ECB will not allow large banks to default. It will inflate to buy the bad assets or else buy the bonds of the governments, so they can make

payments. Then the bankers will put this money into excess reserves. New lending to businesses will cease. The West will go into permanent recession or no-growth stasis. The governments will absorb an ever-larger percentage of the region's capital: bond sales. Private firms will not be able to borrow at low rates. Capital development will crease.
— Gary North (here)

The new millennium is teaching us vastly more about zombies than anybody could have anticipated. Long gone are the virile, predatory vampires that once populated horror stories about capitalism, sucking out the vital essence of the proletariat in gothic fortresses of 'dead labor'. Instead, shambling worm-eaten wrecks mill about aimlessly, whilst augmenting their numbers in obscure cannibalistic circuits that defy rational comprehension and which are, in any case, too hideous to steadily contemplate. Fiends have degenerated into ghouls, who do not hunt and feed to strengthen themselves, but only to carry on, prolonging their putrescent decrepitude.

A 2002 Guardian story about "Japan's zombie economy" prefigures a number of later, and more general, revelations. In particular, it identifies the spreading zombie apocalypse with the slow-motion collapse of Keynesianism, as 'stimulative' monetary and fiscal policies (zero interest rates combined with massive

government deficit spending) lose their magical powers of revitalization, and instead merely perpetuate an interminable state of undeath. Hyper-stimulation is required just to hang on to the flatline.

Of course, being the Guardian, the solution is obvious: "what the economy needs now is a good dose of inflation." For undead Keynesians, there's no malaise too deep for an invigorating wave of currency destruction to solve. This is where the zombie metabolism really gets interesting. By the end of the decade, America had gone full zombie itself, and begun to realize that this wasn't just some weird Japanese thing it didn't understand, but an altogether more general and radically mysterious phenomenon. Ben Bernanke's Federal Reserve pushed US interest rates to the floor (ZIRP) and began to incontinently monetize public debt (QE) whilst nationalizing private debt (TARP), using every available policy instrument to direct the economy in an inflationary direction, at maximum velocity. Nothing much happened. Zombies don't do fever.

At this point, the questions come flooding in. For instance: why is anybody still buying Japanese or American government bonds? Isn't it obvious that this paper represents nothing except a slice of unredeemable debt, promising an insulting return, 'guaranteed' by a structurally insolvent entity, and associated

with policies more-or-less explicitly oriented towards deliberate currency destruction? What are people thinking? To answer that, it's necessary to venture a little deeper into the zombie world.

The idea of the US Dollar (or Japanese Yen) as a 'safe haven' might sound like a joke, and you've probably heard it before:

Joe Dollar and Jacques Euro are camping in the woods, when they suddenly hear the terrifying snuffles of a famished carnivore, getting closer. Joe begins hastily pulling on his running shoes. "What are you doing?" asks Jacques. "You can't out-run a bear market."

"I don't need to outrun the market," Joe replies. "I just need to outrun you."

At Asia Times Online, Martin Hutchinson envisages a financial crisis endgame that "eliminat[es] the government debt markets that have formed the centerpiece of the last three centuries," returning the world to the market-based money and free banking regime of 1693, before the creation of the Bank of England. Paradoxically, however, the prospect of collapse raises the financial potency of the state to an unprecedented level, as the 'safety' it promises disconnects from questions of economic competence and reverts to something far more atavistic and

Hobbesian. Once everything starts to buckle, credibility attaches to the biggest, meanest, and most ruthless provider of mafia-style 'protection'. Relativistic (zero- or negative-sum) power politics takes center stage.

A pedestrian but informative financial report from Bloomberg sets it out clearly:

Jim Chanos, founder of the Kynikos Associates Ltd. hedge fund, said that while the chances of a recession may be increasing, the U.S. economy is the "best house in a bad neighborhood"

The US Dollar might be nothing more than the "best looking horse in the glue factory," but once the financial logic of zombie apocalypse takes over, the implications can be far-reaching. Bloomberg continues:

Ten-year Treasuries erased losses after the U.S. sold $29 billion of seven-year securities at a record low yield of 1.415 percent, wrapping up $99 billion of note sales this week. Ten- year yields fell four basis points to 1.88 percent after climbing as much as four points earlier. The rate is up from a record low of 1.67 percent on Sept. 23.

U.S. Treasuries maturing in seven to 10-years have returned 14 percent this year, outperforming a 9.3 percent return for the broader Treasury market, according to Bank of America Merrill Lynch indexes, as of yesterday [Nov. 23].

It's worth taking a moment to digest these numbers. Nobody expects average US inflation over the next seven years to come in under 1.415% p.a., or under 1.88% over the next ten, so the yield is sheer racketeering. Yet this blatant assault on the lower colon of savers has been compatible with a one-year return of 14% (!) — they're begging for it. Seriously, who cares if Bernanke is lighting up a fat Cuban with a large bill lifted straight out of their pocket? It just makes him look badder, and that's what they're paying for. Gold sounds good in theory, but it doesn't come with its own attached gangster organization, so hanging onto it through the zombie interlude could be difficult. It's safer, by far, to invest in the alpha state.

Because this Hobbesian zombinomics is political and relativisitic, there are epsilon states at the other end of the trade, as well as a beta state caught in the middle. Europe isn't a state at all, of course, which is how the (interminable) final phase of zombinomics got started. Before it changed, however, the EU conjuring act seemed to be going pretty well. Every Eurozone member state issuing government debt in the common currency

paid yields that were broadly harmonized, as if Europe was a financially sovereign entity, standing united behind its paper. The realization that economic sovereignty remained national, even after the alienation of monetary sovereignty to the European Central Bank, came as something of a shock, and bond spreads gaped accordingly.

The hallucination of 'Europe' as a united, honorary alpha state, rapidly degenerated to reality, recoding government bonds as zombie apocalypse security scrip. Suddenly, Greek bonds stopped having anything much to do with the ECB, and started to mumble promises in Greek – ultimately, that the Greek state would do whatever it took to secure redemption, whilst mobilizing its Olympian powers to maintain social discipline if necessary. A flight for the exits immediately ensued. Ditto, with variations of speed and intensity, for all the epsilons (= PIIGS).

Where to flee? That's the zombinomic question par excellence (searching for the best looking horse in the glue factory). First choice, for the keenest Hobbes readers, was to head straight to Mr. Big, a.k.a. Benny the Yank, wait politely whilst he finished smoking a mirved nuke, and then beg for protection (that's your 14% one year jump in the value of a 10-year US Treasury bond, right there). The second choice — more appealing to old-fashioned types who thought economics still counted for

something – was to look for comparative financial responsibility closer to home.

Briefly, this route led to genuine quality, but zombinomics quickly resumed its grip:

Switzerland sparked fears of a new currency war on Tuesday [Sept. 6] after it pegged the Swiss franc against the euro in an attempt to protect its economy from the European debt crisis.

The Swiss National Bank in effect devalued the franc, pledging to buy "unlimited quantities" of foreign currencies to force down its value. The SNB warned that it would no longer allow one Swiss franc to be worth more than €0.83 – equivalent to SFr1.20 to the euro – having watched the two currencies move closer to parity as Switzerland became a "safe haven" from the ravages of the eurozone crisis.

… which brings us to Germany, and the latest chapter in the zombie saga — comic or tragic, and probably both, ironic to the point of absurdity in any case. Ruined, shrunken, divided, and traumatized by guilt, post-war Germany sought above all to bury its nationalistic aspirations in Europe. What became the EU was for Germany – as Algeria was for the French foreign legionnaires – a place in which to forget. Now the bond

'market', in its increasingly desperate search for a big, tough, disciplinary state (a global beta will do fine), is determined to dig the Teutonic Leviathan from its grave.

With twin memories of Weimar hyper-inflation and statist hyper-assertion still vivid, Germany is stubbornly holding out against the full-zombie option of (monetary and fiscal) financial debauchery counter-balanced by Hobbesian security politics. This reluctance to throw itself into the spirit of the age has, naturally enough, exposed it to relentless international vilification, and the pressure will only increase. It could all get unpleasantly interesting.

Suspended Animation (Part 4)

DECEMBER 2, 2011

Playing for time.

By the beginning of the second decade of the new millennium, the world had begun to adapt itself to a problem that had tortured it in the 1930s, and deformed it subsequently — that of sub-optimal equilibrium. The practical significance of this idea is difficult to exaggerate.

As a rigorous economist, Henry Hazlitt was theoretically entitled – and even compelled – to savagely deride the Keynesian model of 'low-employment equilibrium', and to painstakingly explain that it did not describe an equilibrium of any kind (in economic terms). Yet such attacks, like those of the Austrians more generally, have been of slight consequence, since Keynes was

not in any strongly defensible sense an economist, but rather a political economist, in both of the obvious ways this expression can be understood. His bad equilibrium did not reflect the operation of market forces, but rather, the workings of the market under a specific conception of politically realistic circumstances, and the 'analysis' of the General Theory was less a technically rigorous description of events than a political prescription for action, keenly attentive to the opportunities and constraints affecting its application, or transition into policy.

Keynes defined the political spirit of the second half of the 20th century, first in the West, and later more widely, by normalizing the pre-eminence of the state in economic affairs, and by subordinating the idea of economic self-correction to political considerations. The role of the new political economy, now technocratically mainstreamed as economic policy, was to route around labor markets, which could never be expected to work efficiently, since downside corrections were judged politically unacceptable. Pure economics was ended, or at least utterly marginalized, by the recognition that labor could opt out of the game, kick over the table, and refuse to play the commodity. Market-clearing labor pricing became an abstract (and, for Keynesians, risible) conception, oblivious to the realities of popular democratic politics, and – in extremis – the potential for Marxian revolution.

Hence the consensus-building sympathy for the Keynesian approach on the establishment right, where it was interpreted as a bulwark against Marxist temptations, and also the deep antipathy it elicited on the anti-establishment right, where it was (no less realistically) understood as a pre-emptive concession to socialism. On the left, a comparable schism was evident, between those who embraced it as a curtailment of capitalism, and those who denounced it as an ersatz socialism, designed for conservative convenience. The Keynesian 'middle' has been the decisive political reality of the 20th century, and its multiple ideological meanings still organize every major axis of socio-economic controversy.

When labor markets are locked on the downside – through macroeconomic recognition and political petrification of their 'stickiness' – some kind of socio-economic ratchet mechanism is automatically produced. To an extent, capital can flee into informalization (for instance illegal immigrant labor), or international labor arbitrage, intensifying the trend to out-sourcing and globalization. More central, however, are the twin macro-tendencies Keynes focused upon: towards fiscal and monetary compensations, based on demand management and the exploitation of 'money illusion' (or attachment to nominal income). Fiscal stimulus can be undertaken in an attempt to

elevate demand, until it reaches a point of artificial equilibrium commensurate with labor price levels (thus clearing unemployment). Alternatively, or in concert, money supply can be expanded – and currency degraded – to facilitate real wage decreases despite nominal stickiness.

Essentially, that's it. There's no other ammo in the macroeconomic arsenal. This is remarkable given the fact that both fiscal and monetary adjustments are mere tricks, and not even sophisticated tricks, but quite straightforward attempts at confidence manipulation that anybody with 'rational expectations' sees through immediately, thus neutralizing them. On the monetary side this is especially obvious — and well-attested historically. Once inflationary expectations have become entrenched, they become the staple topic of wage negotiations, as was seen in the 1970s. There is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that workers are indifferent to inflationary wage depreciation. 'Money illusion' – insofar as it exists at all – is basically a one-off scam, harvested in the brief period when a long-established reputation for responsible currency management is thrown in the trash. Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice isn't going to happen. Basing economic policy on this is the cheapest kind of street hustle (and few would any longer admit to trying it in public).

Stimulus isn't much better. Real demand is ultimately exchange, and thus derivative from supply. Nobody can (economically) demand anything, without having something to offer in return – that's Say's Law, and it's theoretically impregnable, because it's elementary common sense. The only way to steer around it is conjuring, by extracting demand from one part of the economy invisibly, and re-inserting it conspicuously somewhere else. This kind of magic can get quite Byzantine, so it tends to reach exhaustion more slowly than monetary abuse, but its foundations in sustainable economic reality are no more secure. Once taxpayers acknowledge government debts as liabilities (future tax payments) that have already been virtually deducted from their spending power, the game is over. Since a plausible model for (expansive) fiscal policy exhaustion is sovereign debt crisis, it is not unreasonable to begin drawing the curtains already.

Given the exponential trend of social history, most of what has ever happened has taken place since the Great Depression began, and during this time the world has inhabited — more or less consciously — a deliberately constructed system of illusion, or confidence trick. Whether analyzed from the left or the right, the most striking feature of this situation has been inadequately apprehended, or even interrogated: how has it persisted? How

can something that is transparently [insert epithet] unworkable last for over 80 [insert triple epithet] years?

Eighty years is a pretty good human life-span. Someone could easily expend their life within the Keynesian dream-palace, literally living a lie, with the implication that whatever importance 'reality' might have in theory, it need have almost nothing to do with us. We can miss it completely, caught up in a magic show that exceeds our longevity, half-hypnotized by illusions that no one really believes in, but which suffice to put things off, and off, and off, and … in the long run we are all dead. Who cares about a truth that never arrives? A magic trick that lasts your whole life is your life. Scarcely anybody alive today has known anything else.

And it's all going to be over real soon … honestly …

Suspended Animation (Part 5)

DECEMBER 9, 2011

Engines of Devastation.

Does Postmodernism still seem cool to anybody? — Probably not. Having sold whatever simulacrum of a soul it might have had to the fickle gods of fashion, it has learnt more about the reign of Chronos than it might have expected to – the kids get devoured, and it's on to something new. What was accepted for no good reason gets discarded for no good reason. In political science it's called democracy (but that's another discussion).

Clearly, there's something profoundly just about the disappearance of postmodernism into the trashcan of random difference (what's 'in' has to be new, preferably meaninglessly so). It's even 'poetically just', whatever that means. But it also

destroys information. Although Postmodernism was certainly a fad, it was also a zeitgeist, or spirit of the times. It meant something, despite its own best efforts, at least as a symptom. The disappearance of reality that it announced was itself real, as was the realm of simulation that replaced it. At least in its death, it might have amounted to something.

Consider its greatest mystagogue, Jacques Derrida, and his once widely celebrated 'concept' of differance (yes, with an 'a'), a term within a series of magical words that mark the undecidable, ungraspable, unpresentable, and ultimately inconceivable ontological non-stuff that supplants real events, through an endless succession of displacements and postponements. We can't really say anything about it, so we have to talk about it endlessly, and entire university departments are required to do so. It's ridiculous (and so it's over). But it's also, quite exactly, the globally hegemonic culture of Keynesianized, macroeconomic, programmatic stagnationism, and that isn't over yet, although its morbidity is already highly conspicuous. Unlike faddish academic Postmodernism, its death is going to be really interesting.

Long before the Derridoids got started, Keynes had taught governments that differance was something they could do. Procrastination – the strategic suspension of economic reality

through a popularly ungraspable series of displacements and postponements – quickly came to define the art of politics. Why suffer today what can be put off until tomorrow, or suffer yourself something that could be somebody else's problem? Postpone! Displace! In the long run we are all dead. Reality is for losers.

Differance as it really works is a lot cruder than its reflection in Postmodern philosophy (and what could be philosophically cruder than an appeal to the notion of 'reflection'?). For instance, it is fished out of the ontological abgrund and processed by specific public policy mechanisms, sustained by concrete institutions in ways that are to a considerable extent economically measurable, within elastic but most certainly finite geographical and historical limits. Crudest of all, and ultimately decisive, is the circumscription of derealization, by the real, and the return of the apocalyptic, no longer as a phantasmatic avatar of the 'metaphysics of presence' (or false promise of a real event), but as an impending real event, and one whose process of historical construction is in large measure intelligible. Real differance didn't 'deconstruct' the apocalypse, it built it. It's not even that difficult to see how.

At EconLog, David Henderson has posted his notes from John H. Cochrane's December 3 talk at Stanford University's Hoover

Institution conference on 'Restoring Robust Economic Growth in America'. There's no mention of differance, but there doesn't need to be.

For nearly 100 years we have tried to stop runs with government guarantees — deposit insurance, generous lender of last resort, and bailouts. That patch leads to huge moral hazard. Giving a banker a bailout guarantee is like giving a teenager keys to the car and a case of whisky. So, we appoint regulators who are supposed to stop the banks from taking risks, in a hopeless arms race against smart MBAs, lawyers and lobbyists who try to get around the regulation, and though we allow — nay, we encourage and subsidize — expansion of run-prone assets.

In Dodd-Frank, the US simply doubled down our bets on this regime. …

Bailouts delay a painful economic event (postponement) whilst transferring financial liability (displacement). Risk is restored to virtuality, as disaster is turned back into a threat, but it isn't the same threat. By any remotely sane method of accountancy, it's now worse. Significant virtual deterioration is substituted for actual discomfort. That's the cost of derealization.

How do things get worse, exactly? — In plenty of ways. Start with 'moral hazard', which is a polite way of saying 'insanity'. Actions are decoupled from their consequences, removing the disincentive for craziness. The result, utterly predictably, is more craziness. In fact, anything that systematically enhances moral hazard is simply manufacturing craziness. It's dumping LSD in the water supply, although actually probably worse. So bailouts drive us insane and destroy civilization (no one really disputes that, although they may try to avoid the topic).

Oh, but there's more! — Much more, because all these displacements don't just move things around, they move them up. Risk is centralized, concentrated, systematized, politicized – and that's in the (entirely unrealistic) best case, when it isn't also expanded and degraded by the corruption and inefficiency of weakly- or cynically-incentivized public institutions. This is trickle up – really flood up – economics, in which everything bad that ever happens to anybody gets stripped of any residual sanity (or realistic estimation of consequences), pooled, re-coded, complicated by compensatory regulation, and shifted to ever more ethereal heights of populist democratic irresponsibility, where the only thing that matters is what people want to hear, and that really isn't ever going to be the truth.

"Mess up enough, and you probably suffer or die" – that's the truth. It's a message that doesn't translate into the language of Keynesian kick-the-can politics, which is folk Postmodernism. The nearest we get, as the jaws begin to close on the bail-out bucket chain, is "We're going to need a bigger boat." After innumerable episodes of that, we're all huddled together on the Titanic, and things are kinda, sorta, looking OK. At least the band's still playing …

When abstracted from its squalid psychosis, the pattern is mathematically quite neat. It's called the Martingale system, better known to Americans as 'double or nothing' (and to Brits as 'double or quits'). Cochrane already touched upon it ("the US simply doubled down our bets"). Wager on red, and it comes up black. No problem, just double the bet and repeat. You can't lose. (If you like this logic, Paul Krugman has an economic recovery to sell you.)

What appears as disaster postponed is, in virtual reality, disaster expanded. The Wikipedia entry on the Martingale system helpfully connects it to the Taleb Distribution, otherwise known as scrounging pennies in front of a steam roller. The persistence of small gains makes this business model seem like a sure thing — until it doesn't.

Nassim Nicholas Taleb and Mark Blyth expand on the idea in Foreign Affairs, with application to various aspects of the current (or impending) crisis. Asking why "surprise [is] the permanent condition of the U.S. political and economic elite" they trace the problem to "the artificial suppression of volatility — the ups and downs of life — in the name of stability."

Complex systems that have artificially suppressed volatility tend to become extremely fragile, while at the same time exhibiting no visible risks. In fact, they tend to be too calm and exhibit minimal variability as silent risks accumulate beneath the surface. Although the stated intention of political leaders and economic policymakers is to stabilize the system by inhibiting fluctuations, the result tends to be the opposite. These artificially constrained systems become prone to "Black Swans" — that is, they become extremely vulnerable to large-scale events that lie far from the statistical norm and were largely unpredictable to a given set of observers.

Discussing this article at PJMedia, Richard Fernandez glosses and sharpens its conclusion:

Part of the problem is the consequence of [the elites'] own damping. By attempting to centrally manage systems according to some predetermined scheme they actually store up volatility

rather than dispersing it. By kicking the can down the road they eventually condemn themselves to bumping into a giant pile of cans when they run out of road. … But the elites cannot admit to surprise; nor can they admit to bad things starting on their watch. Therefore they keep sweeping things under the carpet until, as in some horror movie, it spawns a zombie. To make systems robust, says Taleb, you've got to admit that you can make mistakes and pay the price. You will have to in the end anyway.

We aren't in Postmodernism anymore, Toto. We're nearer to this:

The wavelike movement affecting the economic system, the recurrence of periods of boom which are followed by periods of depression, is the unavoidable outcome of the attempts, repeated again and again, to lower the gross market rate of interest by means of credit expansion. There is no means of avoiding the final collapse of a boom brought about by credit expansion. The alternative is only whether the crisis should come sooner as the result of a voluntary abandonment of further credit expansion, or later as a final and total catastrophe of the currency system involved. (Ludwig von Mises, Human Action)

Or even this:

Great is Bankruptcy: the great bottomless gulf into which all Falsehoods, public and private, do sink, disappearing; whither, from the first origin of them, they were all doomed. For Nature is true and not a lie. No lie you can speak or act but it will come, after longer or shorter circulation, like a Bill drawn on Nature's Reality, and be presented there for payment,- -with the answer, No effects. Pity only that it often had so long a circulation: that the original forger were so seldom he who bore the final smart of it! Lies, and the burden of evil they bring, are passed on; shifted from back to back, and from rank to rank; and so land ultimately on the dumb lowest rank, who with spade and mattock, with sore heart and empty wallet, daily come in contact with reality, and can pass the cheat no further.

Observe nevertheless how, by a just compensating law, if the lie with its burden (in this confused whirlpool of Society) sinks and is shifted ever downwards, then in return the distress of it rises ever upwards and upwards. Whereby, after the long pining and demi-starvation of those Twenty Millions, a Duke de Coigny and his Majesty come also to have their 'real quarrel.' Such is the law of just Nature; bringing, though at long intervals, and were it only by Bankruptcy, matters round again to the mark.

But with a Fortunatus' Purse in his pocket, through what length of time might not almost any Falsehood last! Your Society, your Household, practical or spiritual Arrangement, is untrue, unjust, offensive to the eye of God and man. Nevertheless its hearth is warm, its larder well replenished: the innumerable Swiss of Heaven, with a kind of Natural loyalty, gather round it; will prove, by pamphleteering, musketeering, that it is a truth; or if not an unmixed (unearthly, impossible) Truth, then better, a wholesomely attempered one, (as wind is to the shorn lamb), and works well. Changed outlook, however, when purse and larder grow empty! Was your Arrangement so true, so accordant to Nature's ways, then how, in the name of wonder, has Nature, with her infinite bounty, come to leave it famishing there? To all men, to all women and all children, it is now indutiable that your Arrangement was false. Honour to Bankruptcy; ever righteous on the great scale, though in detail it is so cruel! Under all Falsehoods it works, unweariedly mining. No Falsehood, did it rise heaven- high and cover the world, but Bankruptcy, one day, will sweep it down, and make us free of it. (Thomas Carlyle, via Mencius Moldbug, but cited all over the place recently)

Here it comes.

The God Confusion

DECEMBER 19, 2011

A world on its knees, and at your throat.

"Do The Three Abrahamic Faiths Worship The Same God?" Peter Berger asks, on his blog at the American Interest. His answer, which seems to be programmed at least as much by the sensitivities of interfaith politics as by the exigencies of rigorous theology, is a politely nuanced "yes (but)." If anyone is unconvinced about the urgent pertinence of multicultural diplomacy to the question, Berger settles such doubts quickly by depicting the integrated conception of 'Abrahamic faith' as a response to the 'Clash of Civilizations' climate that arose in the wake of 9/11, "with the altogether admirable intention of countering anti-Islamic hatred."

At its core, his argument is both realistic and relatively uncontroversial. It is comparable to an informal set theory, or cladistics, briefly surveying family resemblances and dissimilarities between branches of the Abrahamic religious 'tree' and concluding, reasonably enough, that none of the potential groupings are absolutely strict (each faith, even narrowly defined, is differentiated within itself by sub-branches, and twigs), and that the coherence of 'Judeo-Christian' monotheism is considerably stronger than that of 'Abrahamic Faith' in general. Whatever the complexity of these branchings, however, they derive from a readily identifiable trunk. Berger cites a lecture by the Protestant theologian Miroslav Volf:

Yes, one can say that Christians and Muslims believe in the "same God". There are enough common affirmations to justify this—most importantly, of course, the belief that there is only one God (what the late Richard Niebuhr, coincidentally another Yale Divinity professor, called "radical monotheism")—but also the belief in a personal creator distinct from the creation, and the giver of a moral code.

When evaluated from a wide enough angle, it is clear that the God of Jews, Christians, and Muslims is distinctively specified, relative to alternative religious traditions:

Sometimes it is a good idea to step back and look at the imputed collectivity from afar. It may help to look at the three 'Abrahamic' faiths from, say, Benares, one of the most holy cities of Hinduism and near which the Buddha preached his first sermon. Looked at from that far location, the family resemblance between the three versions suddenly appears quite clearly. Hindus and Buddhists sometimes speak of 'West Asian religion' in contrast with their own 'South Asian 'or 'East Asian religion'. It then seems just about inevitable to say that Jews, Christians and Muslims, whatever their differences, do indeed worship the same God.

To be sure, there are similarities between Benares and Jerusalem as well. There are Hindu versions of theism, with intense devotions to personal deities (bhakti), but there is no real analogue to the monotheism that originated in the deserts of the Near East. In Vedanta, arguably the most sophisticated form of Hinduism, the ultimate reality is the brahman, the impersonal ocean of divinity in which all individual identities eventually dissolve. There are theistic elements in Mahayana Buddhism, with devotion directed toward godlike boddhisatvas—individuals who have attained Enlightenment, but who, out of compassion, delay their entry into the final bliss in order to help others to get there. But that bliss too ends in that impersonal ocean of divinity that seems for many centuries to have

dominated the religious imagination of India, from where it migrated eastward.

Yet, whilst the theological dimension of this question is very far from uninteresting, or inconsequential, it limits the question at least as much as it clarifies it. More than a faith, the 'children of Abraham' share a story, and – still more importantly — a sense of history as a story, and this is the factor that most tightly bundles them together, irrespective of all quibbling over narrative details. Abraham is the beginning of a tale, even if it can be projected back (at least a little way) beyond him. He defines the meaning of history, as an interaction with God, through which the passage of collective time acquires structure, direction, unity, radical finitude, moral and religious significance. Abrahamic history has purpose, and a destination. Above all it tells the story of a moral community, whose righteousness and unrighteousness will ultimately be judged. Eschatology is its real key.

Because the Abrahamic tradition is rooted in a distinctive experience of history, it extends beyond theistic faith. Indeed, any comprehension of this tradition that excludes Marxism, fascist millenarianism, and 'liberal' secular progressivism (even that of the 'New Atheists') is woefully incomplete, to the point of diversionary propaganda. Uniquely, the Abrahamic faiths do

not merely rise, fall, and persist. They are superceded by new revelations, or afflicted by heresy and schism. Their encounters and (inevitable) conflicts become internalized episodes that immediately demand doctrinal and narrative intelligibility. Hence the affinity between the Abrahamic faiths and historical (as 'opposed' to pedagogical, cosmic, or naturalistic) dialectics: the 'other', merely by appearing on the stage, must play its role in the world-historical drama of belief.

Strict monotheism is the personification of narrative unity, and in the end it is the narrative unity that matters. Whether history is finally to be appraised from the perspective of the people of Israel, the Church, the Ummah, achieved communism, an Aryan master-race, or secular multicultural globalism, it will have been integrated through the production of a moral community, and judged as a coherent whole by the standard of that community's purity and righteousness. It will have been comprehended by a collective subject whose story — it insists — is the entire meaning of the world.

For the minor paganisms of antiquity, and the major paganisms of the east, this structure of understanding has the objective potential to be offensive to an almost inestimable degree, so the fact that pagans have rarely contested it with an animosity that even remotely approaches its 'internal' conflicts and disputations

is intriguing. Whilst cases of anti-semitism, anti-clericalism, islamophobia, anti-communism, anti-fascism, and systematic political incorrectness have, on occasions, been plausibly derived from pagan inspirations, in the overwhelming majority of cases it is the various 'fraternal' branches of the great Abrahamic family that have wrought devastation upon each other. Indeed, persecution, as a particular mode of 'zealous' or 'enthusiastic' violence, seems to be an Abrahamic specialty, one that depends upon conceptions of 'intolerable' idolatry, heresy, apostasy, false-consciousness, or political incorrectness that are found nowhere else.

God told Abraham to kill his own son, and he was ready to do so (Gen 22:1-19). That is how he earned his status as the ur-patriarch of the tradition, whose children are defined by the ghost of a knife at their throats. Demonstrated willingness to kill in the name of the Lord, or its abstracted equivalent (the meaning of history), is the initiatory ideal, and the beginning of the world story that now encompasses everyone. After this original ritual, Isaac's life was no longer natural, but ideological. It was suspended, vulnerably, from a word owing nothing to the protective bond tying an animal to its progeny (symbolically terminated by Abraham's surrender to divine command), but settled on high, in the narrative structure of the world. If God had willed it — or the story demanded it — he would have been

slain. In this way an unnatural line, existing only as an expression of divine purpose, breaks from the archaic pagan order of 'meaningless' procreation and nurture. (The place assigned to the sacrifice, Mount Moriah, would later be the site of Jerusalem, the city of the end of time, and beyond nature.) Isaac was spared, but the pagan world was not similarly reprieved.

The existence of an Abrahamic tradition has an importance that far exceeds its internal politics and internecine rivalries, since it is indistinguishable from the historical unification of the world, and no 'other' is able to remain outside its narrative order. In much of the world, even in its Abrahamic heartlands, to refuse God is no great thing, and perhaps little more than a mildly comical affectation, but to depart from World History is quite another matter. It is then that the knife of Abraham glints again.

Political Humor

DECEMBER 29, 2011

The things that really matter.

The prospect of Technological Singularity, by rendering the near future unimaginable, announces "the end of science fiction." This is not, however, an announcement that everyone is compelled to heed. Among the Odysseans who have deliberately deafened themselves to this Sirens' call, none have proceeded more boldly than Charles Stross, whose Singularity Sky is not only a science fiction novel, but a space opera, inhabiting a literary universe obsolesced by Einstein long before I.J. Good completed its demolition. Not only recognizable humans, but inter-stellar space-faring humans! Has the man no shame?

Stross relies heavily upon humor to sustain his audacious anachronism, and in Singularity Sky he puts anachronism to explicit work. The most consistently comic element in the novel is a reconstruction of 19th century Russian politics on the planet of Rochard's World, where the Quasi-Czarist luddism of the New Republic is threatened by a cabal of revolutionaries whose mode of political organization and rhetoric is of a recognizable (and even parodic) Marxist-Leninist type. These rebels, however, are ideologically hard-core libertarian, seeking to overthrow the regime and install a free-market anarchist utopia, an objective that is seamlessly reconciled with materialist dialectics, appeals to revolutionary discipline, and invocations of fraternal comradeship.

It's a joke that works well, because its transparent absurdity co-exists with a substantial plausibility. Libertarians are indeed (not infrequently) crypto-Abrahamic atheistic materialists, firmly attached to deterministic economism and convictions of historical inevitability, leading to lurid socio-economic prophecies of a distinctively eschatological kind. When libertarianism is married to singularitarian techno-apocalypticism, the comic potential, and Marxist resonances, are re-doubled. Stross hammers home the point by naming his super-intelligent AI 'Eschaton'.

Most hilarious of all (in a People's Front of Judea versus Judean People's Front kind of way) is the internecine factionalism besetting a fringe political movement whose utter marginality nevertheless leaves room for bitter mutual recrimination, supported by baroque conspiracy-mongering. This isn't really a Stross theme, but it's an American libertarian specialty, exhibited in the ceaseless agitprop conducted by the Rothbardian ultras of LewRockwell.com and the Mises Institute against the compromised 'Kochtopus' (Reason and Cato) — the animating Stalin-Trotsky split of the free-market 'right'. Anyone looking for a ringside seat at a recent bout can head to the comment threads here and here.

More seriously, Stross' libertarian revolutionaries are committed whole-heartedly to the Marxian assertion, once considered foundational, that productivity is drastically inhibited by the persistence of antiquated social arrangements. The true historical right of the revolution, indistinguishable from its practical inevitability and irreversibility, is its alignment with the liberation of the forces of production from sclerotic institutional limitations. Production of the future, or futuristic production, demands the burial of traditional society. That which exists – the status quo – is a systematic suppression, rigorously measurable or at least determinable in economic terms, of what might be, and wants to be. Revolution would sever the shackles of ossified

authority, setting the engines of creation howling. It would unleash a techno-economic explosion to shake the world, still more profoundly than the 'bourgeois' industrial revolution did before (and continues to do). Something immense would escape, never to be caged again.

That is the Old Faith, the Paleo-Marxist creed, with its snake-handling intensity and intoxicating materialist promise. It's a faith the libertarian comrades of Rochard's World still profess, with reason, and ultimate vindication, because the historical potential of the forces of production has been updated.

What could matter do, that it is not presently permitted to do? This is a question that Marxists (of the 'Old Religion') once asked. Their answer was: to enter into processes of production that are freed from the constraining requirements of private profitability. Once 'freed' in this way, however, productivity staggered about aimlessly, fell asleep, or starved. Libertarians laughed, and argued for a reversal of the formula: free production to enter into self-escalating circuits of private profitability, without political restraint. They were mostly ignored (and always will be).

If neither faction of the terrestrial Marxo-Libertarian revolutionary faith have been able to re-ignite the old fire, it is

because they have drifted out of the depths of the question ('what could matter do?'). It is matter that makes a revolution. The heroes of the industrial revolution were not Jacobins, but boiler makers.

"Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country," Lenin proclaimed, but electrification was permitted before the Bolsheviks took its side, and it has persisted since the Soviets' departure. Unless political transformation coincides with the release of a previously suppressed productive potential, it remains essentially random, and reversible. Mere regime change means nothing, unless something happens that was not allowed to happen before. (Social re-shufflings do not amount to happenings except in the minds of ideologues, and ideologues die.)

Libertarians are like Leninists in this way too: anything they ever manage to gain can (and will) be taken away from them. They already had a constitutional republic in America once (and what happened to that?). Britain had a rough approximation of laissez-faire capitalism, before losing it. Does anybody really think liberalism is going to get more 'classical' than that anytime soon? Trusting mass democracy to preserve liberty is like hiring Hannibal Lecter as a baby sitter. Social freedoms might as well be designed to die. There's not the slightest reason to believe

that history is on their side. Industrial revolution, in contrast, is forever.

On Rochard's World they know exactly what matter could do that is forbidden: nano-scale mechanical self-replication and intelligent self-modification. That's what the 'material base' of a revolution looks like, even if it's sub-microscopic (or especially because it is), and when it reaches the limits of social tolerance it describes precisely what is necessary, automatically. Once it gets out of the box, it stays out.

Stross is sufficiently amused by the unleashed technosphere to call its space-faring avatar 'the Festival'. It contacts the libertarian revolutionaries of Rochard's World by bombarding the planet with telephones, and anyone who picks one up hears the initial bargaining position: 'Entertain us.' Funniest of all, when the neo-Czarist authorities try to stop it, they're eaten.

New Year Cheer

JANUARY 6, 2012

There's a lot of ruin in a global madhouse.

2012 is a year that arrives pre-branded. It's the last opportunity to end the world on schedule. By the end of December the window for apocalyptic profundity will have closed, and it's back to the hazards of random, meaningless catastrophe.

Perhaps a prophetic consensus will have emerged by the fall, but right now the outlook is foggy at best. Trawling through the Web's most excitable 2012 sites doesn't bring anything very definite into focus. Once discussion advances beyond the fairly solid foundation of the Mayan long count, and the Fourth Age of Creation (lasting from August 11, 3114 BC, to December 21, AD 2012), things spin off into chaos with disconcerting rapidity.

Whether the earth is destined to plunge into a black hole is a matter of (at least limited) controversy, but the fact that just about every imaginable species of prospective calamity or transformation is being sucked into the 2012 prophetic vortex is easily confirmed by anybody with a web browser. Even the basic genre remains unsettled, with expectations veering wildly from celestial collisions, solar flares, and super-volcanoes, to spiritual awakenings, cosmic harmonizations, and countless varieties of Messianic fulfillment. According to the sober forecasters at 2012apocalypse.net: "The Mayans, Hopis, Egyptians, Kabbalists, Essenes, Qero elders of Peru, Navajo, Cherokee, Apache, Iroquois confederacy, Dogon Tribe, and Aborigines all believe in an ending to this Great 2012 Apocalyptic Cycle." They missed out Mother Shipton, Nostradamus, Terence McKenna, Kalki Bagavan, and Web Bot, yet somehow the Cracked crew remain unconvinced.

As an aside, the best line UF has yet seen among the deniers (sorry, couldn't resist that), is this deliciously self-undermining specimen from Ian O'Neill: "No one has ever predicted the future, and that isn't about to change."

In an increasingly desegregated cultural landscape, it's not easy to separate out secular history and sensible opinion from the

orgiastically gathering End Times festival, and – strangely enough – the world process isn't doing much to oblige. Ritualistic predictions-for-the-year-ahead posts on politics and economics sites are practically indistinguishable from the 2012 Armageddon-is-here prophecies, although the sane side of prognostication is characterized by a greater uniformity of unrelenting bleakness: Comprehensive economic collapse, aggravated by administrative sclerosis, and accompanied by escalating international conflict / social disintegration, amidst the enraged screams of splintering civilizations (and a 'Happy New Year' to you, too.)

Goldbug Darryl Robert Schoon demonstrates some professional hedging, but he doesn't even try to keep impending financial crisis from spilling out into cosmic immensities:

The ending of the Mayan calendar in 2012 is as misunderstood as the interplay between credit and debt and supply and demand; but the coincident collapse of the current economic paradigm and an arcane indicator of change should not be dismissed. … The current great wave [of rising prices] began in 1896. That it could crest and break in 2012 could be a coincidence. Or, it may not.

Science, technology, creative culture, and enterprise are likely to spring some upside surprises, but the degenerative horror of the world's hegemonic Keynesian political economy – combined with increasingly irresponsible neoconservative democracy-mongering — has ominously synchronized itself with the darkest visions of the 2012 cults. A patently dysfunctional mode of socio-economic organization, based upon fake money, belligerent idiocracy, and electorally-enabled looting scams, is aggressively imposing itself – with an almost incomprehensible absence of self-reflection — upon a world that already has plenty of indigenous pathologies to contend with. The resulting New World Order, entirely predictably, is a lunatic asylum, and even its most functional components (such as Singapore and the Chinese SARs of Hong Kong and Macao) are networked into the collective delirium. When the Euro, Japanese Yen, and US Dollar collapse (probably in that order) the financial and geopolitical tsunami will wash over everybody. If that doesn't happen in 2012, history has no sense of narrative climax at all.

On the 'bright' side – for all the can-kickers out there – the words of Adam Smith that have defined 2011 continue to resonate. "Young man, there's a lot of ruin in a nation," and even more in a global system. Perhaps the slow-motion disintegration of hegemonic neo-fascism Keynesian social democracy will spin itself out beyond the horizon of the Mayan

calendar, which would really give us something to look forward to …

Signs of Progress

FEBRUARY 7, 2012

How the modern world lost its senses.

The more sophisticated animals become, the worse they get at connecting with reality. As they cephalize, and socialize, stories substitute for reflexes, and the survival value of a story owes almost nothing to its factuality. Believing what everyone else does, or what makes you feel good, counts for vastly more. Wherever it is that discussion leads, it is only very rarely, and accidentally, in the direction of reality.

Science begins with the realization that stories aren't to be trusted, even – or especially – if they sound credible, conform to prior intuitions, and readily attain social approval. Since narrative satisfaction is the great deceiver, science reaches beyond

language into the vast frigid tracts of mathematical signs, stripped clean of all moral and emotional significance. Hardening itself against the temptation to see faces in the clouds, or hear voices from the heavens, it digs determinedly into the test-bed of numbers and quantitative signals, where seductive words are led to die.

Economics has never been a science, but economic behavior, and even theory, has been able to avail itself of a measure of leverage against story-telling. Its great resource in this regard has been the price system, expressed in 'meaningless' quantities (without immediate narrative significance) which enable economic calculation to sustain a posture of ideological indifference. An accountant who tells a story is a bad accountant, and most probably a criminal, whilst an entrepreneur fixated upon a story of how things 'must be' is subject to market-Darwinian nemesis. That, at least, is how laissez-faire hard money capitalism once roughly worked, as attested for instance by the indignation of Charles Dickens, who insisted upon the right of moral, political, and religious story-telling in the midst of a process that systematically disdained it.

Things have progressed incalculably since then, in a direction that could be confidently described as 'Dickensian' if that adjective had not already been settled in its highly-effective

polemical purpose. That 'the Big Story' (BS) would triumph over calculative Scroogean realism was perhaps entirely predictable, but the near-metaphysical comprehensiveness of its victory – and its revenge — was less easy to anticipate. When attempting to gauge this progress, money is the best indicator, or rather, the destruction of money as an indicator is the most telling sign.

Under the conditions of hard money industrial capitalism, progress follows two, rigorously accounted tracks. Most notoriously, it is measured as a process of accumulation, or the amassing of fortunes through profitable business activity. Economic intelligence is socially dispersed along with the multitude of fortunes, with each unit of capital accompanied by its own (Scroogish) accounting function, weighing revenues against outlays, and estimating the viability of continued operation. This intelligence does not lend itself to convenient or reliable public aggregation.

Accompanying the multiplicity of private progressions (and regressions), there is a second track measuring social advance in strictly quantitative, meaningless, and unambiguous terms. On this track, technical and organizational improvements in business activity overspill private accounts, and take the form of public 'externalities'. Under any monetary system competent to register reality, such general social advances are expressed as

falling prices, cost reduction, or deflation. (A typically insightful Zero Hedge post on the topic can be found here.)

The importance of this point is difficult to over-emphasize, especially since it directly contradicts our carefully fabricated neo-Dickensian common sense: Deflation! Isn't that kind of like fascism or something?

Deflation can certainly represent a type of socio-economic misfortune, under specific conditions. During business cycle downturns, for instance, it can reflect fire-sale asset or inventory reductions, driven by, and exacerbating, credit crises. The seriousness and typicality of such cases is strongly asserted in the dominant (neo-Dickensian) story of the Great Depression. It is worth noting, however, that even under these circumstances – at the worst – the first-order effect of deflation is to generate a spontaneous increase in affluence, or spending power. When life is at its toughest, it gets cheaper to live.

In the hard money world, chronic mild deflation simply is social progress. The two concepts are effectively indistinguishable. Gentle deflation is the invisible hand out, giving everybody a little more of almost everything, year by year, as it spontaneously distributes a fraction of the 'social surplus', or public dividend on rising productivity. Even in today's radically progressed

world of ruined money, the output of the consumer electronics industry still manages to exhibit the deflationary trends that have been obliterated elsewhere (so next time you buy a gizmo, don't forget to feel appropriately oppressed.)

What the hell in heavens happened? How did modernity's metallo-monetary senses get turned off, rapturing Scrooge into a Christmas Carol, and eclipsing industrial reality? One obvious neo-Dickensian go-to guy for that is William Jennings Bryan (1860-1925), a politician whose multi-dimensional war against reality – truly astounding in its consistency – represents enthusiasm for the Big Story (or 'social gospel') at its most uncompromised. Either Bryan's anti-Darwinism (the Scopes trial) or his ardent prohibitionism (campaigning for the 18th amendment) would have sufficed to earn him a place in the historical record as a hero of the BS ('evangelical' or 'progressive') State, but his most enduring legacy rests upon the speech he delivered on July 9, 1896, to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, in which he declared – as if to Scrooge himself – that "You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns; you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold."

This is a declaration that is sublimed to progressive universality through the elimination of context. Embedded within the late

19th century debates on bimetallism (price-fixing of gold-silver exchange rates), its present implications are significantly diluted, or at least complicated, by questions about the financial responsibility of central authorities, creditor-debtor class warfare, global economic integration, agrarian-urban tensions, and (East-West) regional politics in the USA. Yet, fundamentally, it can be recognized as 'Dickensian': the passionate denunciation of a neutral criterion for economic reality, precisely for its neutrality, or indifference to Big Story moral-historical narrative. Gold is cold. It measures without judgment. Between damnation and salvation it demonstrates no preference or inclination.

Concretely, gold was registering, in economic terms, the social upheaval of American industrial urbanization. Mechanization of agriculture implied falling food prices, ruination of small farmers, and rural depopulation, during a sustained process of massive disruption whose miseries were only exceeded by the socio-economic revitalization in its wake. In its distribution and in its accounting function, gold facilitated the depreciation of rural labor, the bankruptcy of misallocated businesses, and the empowerment of concentrated industrial capital in the nation's rising urban centers. Bryan articulated the views of those at the sharpest edge of this shift, who found the messenger culpable for the message, the senses guilty for the scene: "If thine eye

offends thee pluck it out" (Matthew 18:9). (Even though Bryan lost all three of his presidential elections bids, we're all totally plucked.)

To make of money a vehicle of moral purpose, rather than a neutral registry of fact, is to make the crossing from liberalism and progress as they were once understood (dynamic industrialism), to the progressive liberalism of today (political evangelism). If money can save us (through 'demand management'), as the Keynesians insist, then its politicization is a moral imperative, whose neglect is a sin of omission. The senses are transformed into story-tellers. Shut the windows, and listen to the Christmas Carol. It's progress (honestly).

Bonfire of the Vanities

FEBRUARY 24, 2012

The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

As an ideological mantra, 'Never Again' is associated primarily with the genocide politics of the 1940s, and in this context its effectiveness has been questionable, at best. As a dominating imperative, it has been vastly more consequential within the economic sphere, as a response to the Great Depression of the 1930s. Whilst ethnically selective mass killing is widely frowned upon, its attractions have been difficult to suppress. Deflationary depression, on the other hand, is simply not allowed to happen. This has been the supreme axiom of practical morality for almost a century, uniquely and distinctively shaping our age. We can call it the Prime Directive.

For the Western world, the 1930s were a near-death experience, an intimate encounter with the abyss, recalled with religious intensity. Because the threat was 'existential' – or unsurpassable – the remedy was invested with the absolute passion of a faith. The Prime Directive was adopted as a basic and final law, to which all social institutions and interests were subordinated without reservation. To question or resist it was to invite comprehensive disaster, and only a radically uninformed or criminally reckless heretic – a 'crank' – would do that. Anything is better than deflationary depression. That is the New Deal Law.

The consolidation of financial central planning, based on central banking and fiat currencies, provided the priesthood of the Prime Directive with everything it needed to ensure collective obedience: No deflationary depression without deflation, and no deflation with a well-oiled printing press. 'Counter-cyclical' inflation was always an option, and the hegemony of Anglophone economic-historical experience within the flourishing American century marginalized the memory of inflationary traumas to global backwaters of limited influence. Beside the moral grandeur of the Prime Directive, monetary integrity counted for nothing (only a crank, or a German, could argue otherwise).

The Prime Directive defines a regime that is both historically concrete and systemically generalizable. As Ashwin Parameswaran explains on his Macroeconomic Resilience blog, this type of regime is expressed with equal clarity in projects to manage a variety of other (non-economic) complex systems, including rivers and forests. Modern forestry, dominated by an imperative to fire suppression, provides an especially illuminating example. He notes:

The impetus for both fire suppression and macroeconomic stabilisation came from a crisis. In economics, this crisis was the Great Depression which highlighted the need for stabilising fiscal and monetary policy during a crisis. Out of all the initiatives, the most crucial from a systems viewpoint was the expansion of lender-of-last-resort operations and bank bailouts which tried to eliminate all disturbances at their source. In [Hyram] Minsky's words: "The need for lender-of-Iast-resort operations will often occur before income falls steeply and before the well nigh automatic income and financial stabilizing effects of Big Government come into play." (Stabilizing an Unstable Economy pg 46)

Similarly, the battle for complete fire suppression was won after the Great Idaho Fires of 1910. "The Great Idaho Fires of August 1910 were a defining event for fire policy and

management, indeed for the policy and management of all natural resources in the United States. Often called the Big Blowup, the complex of fires consumed 3 million acres of valuable timber in northern Idaho and western Montana…..The battle cry of foresters and philosophers that year was simple and compelling: fires are evil, and they must be banished from the earth. The federal Weeks Act, which had been stalled in Congress for years, passed in February 1911. This law drastically expanded the Forest Service and established cooperative federal-state programs in fire control. It marked the beginning of federal fire-suppression efforts and effectively brought an end to light burning practices across most of the country. The prompt suppression of wildland fires by government agencies became a national paradigm and a national policy" (Sara Jensen and Guy McPherson). In 1935, the Forest Service implemented the '10 AM policy', a goal to extinguish every new fire by 10 AM the day after it was reported.

In both cases, the trauma of a catastrophic disaster triggered a new policy that would try to stamp out all disturbances at the source, no matter how small.

At Zerohedge, The World Complex elaborates on the history of fire suppression in the United States:

The forests of the southwestern United States were subjected to a lengthy dry season, quite unlike the forests of the northeast. The northeastern forests were humid enough that decomposition of dead material would replenish the soils; but in the southwest, the climate was too dry in the summer and too cool in the winter for decomposition to be effective. Fire was needed to ensure healthy forests. Apart from replenishing the soils, fire was needed to reduce flammable litter, and the heat or smoke was required to germinate seeds.

In the late 19th century, light burning — setting small surface fires episodically to clear underbrush and keep the forests open — was a common practice in the western United States. So long as the fires remained small they tended to burn out undergrowth while leaving the older growth of the forests unscathed. The settlers who followed this practice recognized its native heritage; just as its opponents called it "Paiute forestry" as an expression of scorn (Pyne, 1982).

Supporters of burning did so for both philosophical and practical reasons — burning being the "Indian way" as well as expanding pasture and reducing fuels for forest fires. The detractors argued that small fires destroyed young trees, depleted soils, made the forest more susceptible to insects and disease, and were economically damaging. But the critical argument put

forth by the opponents of burning was that it was inimical to the Progressive Spirit of Conservation. As a modern people, Americans should use the superior, scientific approaches of forest management that were now available to them, and which had not been available to the natives. Worse than being wrong, accepting native forest management methods would be primitive.

Spelling out the eventual consequences of the 'progressive' reformation of forest management practices probably isn't necessary, since – in striking contrast to its economic analog – its lessons have been quite thoroughly absorbed, widely and frequently referenced. Ecologically-sophisticated environmentalists, in particular, have become attached to it as a deterrent model of arrogant intervention, and its perverse consequences. Everybody knows that the attempt to eliminate forest fires, rather than extinguishing risk, merely displaced, and even accentuated it, as the accumulation of tinder transformed a regime punctuated by comparatively frequent fires of moderate scale with one episodically devastated by massive, all-consuming conflagrations.

Parameswaran explains that the absence of fires leads to fuel build-up, ecological drift towards less fire-resistant species, reduction in diversity, and increased connectivity. The

'protected' or 'stabilized' forest changes in nature, from a cleared, robust, mixed, and patch-worked system, to a fuel-cluttered, fragile, increasingly mono-cultural and tightly interconnected mass, amounting almost to an explosive device. Stability degrades resilience, and preventing the catastrophe-to-come becomes increasingly expensive and uncertain, even as the importance of prevention rises. By the penultimate stage of this process, crisis management has engineered an impending apocalypse: a disastrous event that simply cannot possibly be allowed to happen (although it surely will).

Parameswaran calls this apocalyptic development sequence The Pathology of Stabilisation in Complex Adaptive Systems. It's what the Prime Directive inevitably leads to. Unfortunately, diagnosis contains no hint of remedy. Every step up the road makes escape more improbable, as the scale of potential calamity rises. Few will find much comfort in the realization that taking this path was insane.

'Black-boxes' (or flight recorders) retrieved from air disasters are informative in this respect. With surprising regularity, the last words of the pilot, announced to no one in particular, eloquently express an acknowledgment of unattractive but unmistakable reality: "Oh $#it!" Less common – in fact, unheard of – is any honest address to the passengers: "Ladies and gentlemen, this is

your captain speaking. We are all about to die." What would be the point?

Everything to be realistically expected from our ruling political and financial elites can be predicted by rigorous analogy. This flight doesn't end anywhere good, but it would be foolish to await an announcement.

Unencumbered by official position in the Cathedral of the Prime Directive, 'Mickeyman' at World Complex is free to sum things up with brutal honesty:

We have lived through a long period of financial management, in which failing financial institutions have been propped up by emergency intervention (applied somewhat selectively). Defaults have not been permitted. The result has been a tremendous build-up of paper ripe for burning. Had the fires of default been allowed to burn freely in the past we may well have healthier financial institutions. Instead we find our banks loaded up with all kinds of flammable paper products; their basements stuffed with barrels of black powder. Trails of black powder run from bank to bank, and it's raining matches.

The Dark Enlightenment (Part 1)

MARCH 2, 2012

Neo-reactionaries head for the exit.

Enlightenment is not only a state, but an event, and a process. As the designation for an historical episode, concentrated in northern Europe during the 18th century, it is a leading candidate for the 'true name' of modernity, capturing its origin and essence ('Renaissance' and 'Industrial Revolution' are others). Between 'enlightenment' and 'progressive enlightenment' there is only an elusive difference, because illumination takes time – and feeds on itself, because enlightenment is self-confirming, its revelations 'self-evident', and because a retrograde, or reactionary, 'dark enlightenment' amounts almost to intrinsic contradiction. To become

enlightened, in this historical sense, is to recognize, and then to pursue, a guiding light.

There were ages of darkness, and then enlightenment came. Clearly, advance has demonstrated itself, offering not only improvement, but also a model. Furthermore, unlike a renaissance, there is no need for an enlightenment to recall what was lost, or to emphasize the attractions of return. The elementary acknowledgement of enlightenment is already Whig history in miniature.

Once certain enlightened truths have been found self-evident, there can be no turning back, and conservatism is pre-emptively condemned – predestined — to paradox. F. A. Hayek, who refused to describe himself as a conservative, famously settled instead upon the term 'Old Whig', which – like 'classical liberal' (or the still more melancholy 'remnant') – accepts that progress isn't what it used to be. What could an Old Whig be, if not a reactionary progressive? And what on earth is that?

Of course, plenty of people already think they know what reactionary modernism looks like, and amidst the current collapse back into the 1930s their concerns are only likely to grow. Basically, it's what the 'F' word is for, at least in its progressive usage. A flight from democracy under these

circumstances conforms so perfectly to expectations that it eludes specific recognition, appearing merely as an atavism, or confirmation of dire repetition.

Still, something is happening, and it is – at least in part – something else. One milestone was the April 2009 discussion hosted at Cato Unbound among libertarian thinkers (including Patri Friedman and Peter Thiel) in which disillusionment with the direction and possibilities of democratic politics was expressed with unusual forthrightness. Thiel summarized the trend bluntly: "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible."

In August 2011, Michael Lind posted a democratic riposte at Salon, digging up some impressively malodorous dirt, and concluding:

The dread of democracy by libertarians and classical liberals is justified. Libertarianism really is incompatible with democracy. Most libertarians have made it clear which of the two they prefer. The only question that remains to be settled is why anyone should pay attention to libertarians.

Lind and the 'neo-reactionaries' seem to be in broad agreement that democracy is not only (or even) a system, but rather a

vector, with an unmistakable direction. Democracy and 'progressive democracy' are synonymous, and indistinguishable from the expansion of the state. Whilst 'extreme right wing' governments have, on rare occasions, momentarily arrested this process, its reversal lies beyond the bounds of democratic possibility. Since winning elections is overwhelmingly a matter of vote buying, and society's informational organs (education and media) are no more resistant to bribery than the electorate, a thrifty politician is simply an incompetent politician, and the democratic variant of Darwinism quickly eliminates such misfits from the gene pool. This is a reality that the left applauds, the establishment right grumpily accepts, and the libertarian right has ineffectively railed against. Increasingly, however, libertarians have ceased to care whether anyone is 'pay[ing them] attention' – they have been looking for something else entirely: an exit.

It is a structural inevitability that the libertarian voice is drowned out in democracy, and according to Lind it should be. Ever more libertarians are likely to agree. 'Voice' is democracy itself, in its historically dominant, Rousseauistic strain. It models the state as a representation of popular will, and making oneself heard means more politics. If voting as the mass self-expression of politically empowered peoples is a nightmare engulfing the world, adding to the hubbub doesn't help. Even more than

Equality-vs-Liberty, Voice-vs-Exit is the rising alternative, and libertarians are opting for voiceless flight. Patri Friedman remarks: "we think that free exit is so important that we've called it the only Universal Human Right."

For the hardcore neo-reactionaries, democracy is not merely doomed, it is doom itself. Fleeing it approaches an ultimate imperative. The subterranean current that propels such anti-politics is recognizably Hobbesian, a coherent dark enlightenment, devoid from its beginning of any Rousseauistic enthusiasm for popular expression. Predisposed, in any case, to perceive the politically awakened masses as a howling irrational mob, it conceives the dynamics of democratization as fundamentally degenerative: systematically consolidating and exacerbating private vices, resentments, and deficiencies until they reach the level of collective criminality and comprehensive social corruption. The democratic politician and the electorate are bound together by a circuit of reciprocal incitement, in which each side drives the other to ever more shameless extremities of hooting, prancing cannibalism, until the only alternative to shouting is being eaten.

Where the progressive enlightenment sees political ideals, the dark enlightenment sees appetites. It accepts that governments are made out of people, and that they will eat well. Setting its

expectations as low as reasonably possible, it seeks only to spare civilization from frenzied, ruinous, gluttonous debauch. From Thomas Hobbes to Hans-Hermann Hoppe and beyond, it asks: How can the sovereign power be prevented – or at least dissuaded — from devouring society? It consistently finds democratic 'solutions' to this problem risible, at best.

Hoppe advocates an anarcho-capitalist 'private law society', but between monarchy and democracy he does not hesitate (and his argument is strictly Hobbesian):

As a hereditary monopolist, a king regards the territory and the people under his rule as his personal property and engages in the monopolistic exploitation of this "property." Under democracy, monopoly and monopolistic exploitation do not disappear. Rather, what happens is this: instead of a king and a nobility who regard the country as their private property, a temporary and interchangeable caretaker is put in monopolistic charge of the country. The caretaker does not own the country, but as long as he is in office he is permitted to use it to his and his protégés' advantage. He owns its current use – usufruct– but not its capital stock. This does not eliminate exploitation. To the contrary, it makes exploitation less calculating and carried out with little or no regard to the capital stock. Exploitation

becomes shortsighted and capital consumption will be systematically promoted.

Political agents invested with transient authority by multi-party democratic systems have an overwhelming (and demonstrably irresistible) incentive to plunder society with the greatest possible rapidity and comprehensiveness. Anything they neglect to steal – or 'leave on the table' – is likely to be inherited by political successors who are not only unconnected, but actually opposed, and who can therefore be expected to utilize all available resources to the detriment of their foes. Whatever is left behind becomes a weapon in your enemy's hand. Best, then, to destroy what cannot be stolen. From the perspective of a democratic politician, any type of social good that is neither directly appropriable nor attributable to (their own) partisan policy is sheer waste, and counts for nothing, whilst even the most grievous social misfortune – so long as it can be assigned to a prior administration or postponed until a subsequent one – figures in rational calculations as an obvious blessing. The long-range techno-economic improvements and associated accumulation of cultural capital that constituted social progress in its old (Whig) sense are in nobody's political interest. Once democracy flourishes, they face the immediate threat of extinction.

Civilization, as a process, is indistinguishable from diminishing time-preference (or declining concern for the present in comparison to the future). Democracy, which both in theory and evident historical fact accentuates time-preference to the point of convulsive feeding-frenzy, is thus as close to a precise negation of civilization as anything could be, short of instantaneous social collapse into murderous barbarism or zombie apocalypse (which it eventually leads to). As the democratic virus burns through society, painstakingly accumulated habits and attitudes of forward-thinking, prudential, human and industrial investment, are replaced by a sterile, orgiastic consumerism, financial incontinence, and a 'reality television' political circus. Tomorrow might belong to the other team, so it's best to eat it all now.

Winston Churchill, who remarked in neo-reactionary style that "the best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter" is better known for suggesting "that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried." Whilst never exactly conceding that "OK, democracy sucks (in fact, it really sucks), but what's the alternative?" the implication is obvious. The general tenor of this sensibility is attractive to modern conservatives, because it resonates with their wry, disillusioned acceptance of relentless civilizational deterioration, and with the

associated intellectual apprehension of capitalism as an unappetizing but ineliminable default social arrangement, which remains after all catastrophic or merely impractical alternatives have been discarded. The market economy, on this understanding, is no more than a spontaneous survival strategy that stitches itself together amidst the ruins of a politically devastated world. Things will probably just get worse forever. So it goes.

So, what is the alternative? (There's certainly no point trawling through the 1930s for one.) "Can you imagine a 21st-century post-demotist society? One that saw itself as recovering from democracy, much as Eastern Europe sees itself as recovering from Communism?" asks supreme Sith Lord of the neo-reactionaries, Mencius Moldbug. "Well, I suppose that makes one of us."

Moldbug's formative influences are Austro-libertarian, but that's all over. As he explains:

… libertarians cannot present a realistic picture of a world in which their battle gets won and stays won. They wind up looking for ways to push a world in which the State's natural downhill path is to grow, back up the hill. This prospect is

Sisyphean, and it's understandable why it attracts so few supporters.

His awakening into neo-reaction comes with the (Hobbesian) recognition that sovereignty cannot be eliminated, caged, or controlled. Anarcho-capitalist utopias can never condense out of science fiction, divided powers flow back together like a shattered Terminator, and constitutions have exactly as much real authority as a sovereign interpretative power allows them to have. The state isn't going anywhere because — to those who run it — it's worth far too much to give up, and as the concentrated instantiation of sovereignty in society, nobody can make it do anything. If the state cannot be eliminated, Moldbug argues, at least it can be cured of democracy (or systematic and degenerative bad government), and the way to do that is to formalize it. This is an approach he calls 'neo-cameralism'.

To a neocameralist, a state is a business which owns a country. A state should be managed, like any other large business, by dividing logical ownership into negotiable shares, each of which yields a precise fraction of the state's profit. (A well-run state is very profitable.) Each share has one vote, and the shareholders elect a board, which hires and fires managers.

This business's customers are its residents. A profitably-managed neocameralist state will, like any business, serve its customers efficiently and effectively. Misgovernment equals mismanagement.

Firstly, it is essential to squash the democratic myth that a state 'belongs' to the citizenry. The point of neo-cameralism is to buy out the real stakeholders in sovereign power, not to perpetuate sentimental lies about mass enfranchisement. Unless ownership of the state is formally transferred into the hands of its actual rulers, the neo-cameral transition will simply not take place, power will remain in the shadows, and the democratic farce will continue.

So, secondly, the ruling class must be plausibly identified. It should be noted immediately, in contradistinction to Marxist principles of social analysis, that this is not the 'capitalist bourgeoisie'. Logically, it cannot be. The power of the business class is already clearly formalized, in monetary terms, so the identification of capital with political power is perfectly redundant. It is necessary to ask, rather, who do capitalists pay for political favors, how much these favors are potentially worth, and how the authority to grant them is distributed. This requires, with a minimum of moral irritation, that the entire social landscape of political bribery ('lobbying') is exactly

mapped, and the administrative, legislative, judicial, media, and academic privileges accessed by such bribes are converted into fungible shares. Insofar as voters are worth bribing, there is no need to entirely exclude them from this calculation, although their portion of sovereignty will be estimated with appropriate derision. The conclusion of this exercise is the mapping of a ruling entity that is the truly dominant instance of the democratic polity. Moldbug calls it the Cathedral.

The formalization of political powers, thirdly, allows for the possibility of effective government. Once the universe of democratic corruption is converted into a (freely transferable) shareholding in gov-corp. the owners of the state can initiate rational corporate governance, beginning with the appointment of a CEO. As with any business, the interests of the state are now precisely formalized as the maximization of long-term shareholder value. There is no longer any need for residents (clients) to take any interest in politics whatsoever. In fact, to do so would be to exhibit semi-criminal proclivities. If gov-corp doesn't deliver acceptable value for its taxes (sovereign rent), they can notify its customer service function, and if necessary take their custom elsewhere. Gov-corp would concentrate upon running an efficient, attractive, vital, clean, and secure country, of a kind that is able to draw customers. No voice, free exit.

… although the full neocameralist approach has never been tried, its closest historical equivalents to this approach are the 18th-century tradition of enlightened absolutism as represented by Frederick the Great, and the 21st-century nondemocratic tradition as seen in lost fragments of the British Empire such as Hong Kong, Singapore and Dubai. These states appear to provide a very high quality of service to their citizens, with no meaningful democracy at all. They have minimal crime and high levels of personal and economic freedom. They tend to be quite prosperous. They are weak only in political freedom, and political freedom is unimportant by definition when government is stable and effective.

In European classical antiquity, democracy was recognized as a familiar phase of cyclical political development, fundamentally decadent in nature, and preliminary to a slide into tyranny. Today this classical understanding is thoroughly lost, and replaced by a global democratic ideology, entirely lacking in critical self-reflection, that is asserted not as a credible social-scientific thesis, or even as a spontaneous popular aspiration, but rather as a religious creed, of a specific, historically identifiable kind:

… a received tradition I call Universalism, which is a nontheistic Christian sect. Some other current labels for this same tradition,

more or less synonymous, are progressivism, multiculturalism, liberalism, humanism, leftism, political correctness, and the like. … Universalism is the dominant modern branch of Christianity on the Calvinist line, evolving from the English Dissenter or Puritan tradition through the Unitarian, Transcendentalist, and Progressive movements. Its ancestral briar patch also includes a few sideways sprigs that are important enough to name but whose Christian ancestry is slightly better concealed, such as Rousseauvian laicism, Benthamite utilitarianism, Reformed Judaism, Comtean positivism, German Idealism, Marxist scientific socialism, Sartrean existentialism, Heideggerian postmodernism, etc, etc, etc. … Universalism, in my opinion, is best described as a mystery cult of power. … It's as hard to imagine Universalism without the State as malaria without the mosquito. … The point is that this thing, whatever you care to call it, is at least two hundred years old and probably more like five. It's basically the Reformation itself. … And just walking up to it and denouncing it as evil is about as likely to work as suing Shub-Niggurath in small-claims court.

To comprehend the emergence of our contemporary predicament, characterized by relentless, totalizing, state expansion, the proliferation of spurious positive 'human rights' (claims on the resources of others backed by coercive bureaucracies), politicized money, reckless evangelical 'wars for

democracy', and comprehensive thought control arrayed in defense of universalistic dogma (accompanied by the degradation of science into a government public relations function), it is necessary to ask how Massachusetts came to conquer the world, as Moldbug does. With every year that passes, the international ideal of sound governance finds itself approximating more closely and rigidly to the standards set by the Grievance Studies departments of New England universities. This is the divine providence of the ranters and levelers, elevated to a planetary teleology, and consolidated as the reign of the Cathedral.

The Cathedral has substituted its gospel for everything we ever knew. Consider just the concerns expressed by America's founding fathers (compiled by 'Liberty-clinger', comment #1, here):

A democracy is nothing more than mob rule, where 51% of the people may take away the rights of the other 49%. — Thomas Jefferson

Democracy is two wolves and a lamb voting on what to have for lunch. Liberty is a well-armed lamb contesting the vote!— Benjamin Franklin

Democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide. — John Adams

Democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their death. — James Madison

We are a Republican Government, Real liberty is never found in despotism or in the extremes of democracy…it has been observed that a pure democracy if it were practicable would be the most perfect government. Experience has proved that no position is more false than this. The ancient democracies in which the people themselves deliberated never possessed one good feature of government. Their very character was tyranny…— Alexander Hamilton

More on voting with your feet (and the incandescent genius of Moldbug), next …

Added Note (March 7):

Don't trust the attribution of the 'Benjamin Franklin' quote, above. According to Barry Popik, the saying was probably invented by James Bovard, in 1992. (Bovard remarks elsewhere:

"There are few more dangerous errors in political thinking than to equate democracy with liberty.")

The Dark Enlightenment (Part 2)

MARCH 9, 2012

The arc of history is long, but it bends towards zombie apocalypse.

David Graeber: It strikes me that if one is going to pursue this to its logical conclusion, the only way to have a genuinely democratic society would also be to abolish capitalism in this state.

Marina Sitrin: We can't have democracy with capitalism… Democracy and capitalism don't work together.

(Here, via John J. Miller)

That's always the trouble with history. It always looks like it's over. But it never is.

(Mencius Moldbug)

Googling 'democracy' and 'liberty' together is highly enlightening, in a dark way. In cyberspace, at least, it is clear that only a distinct minority think of these terms as positively coupled. If opinion is to be judged in terms of the Google spider and its digital prey, by far the most prevalent association is disjunctive, or antagonistic, drawing upon the reactionary insight that democracy poses a lethal menace to liberty, all but ensuring its eventual eradication. Democracy is to liberty as Gargantua to a pie ("Surely you can see that we love liberty, to the point of gut-rumbling and salivation …").

Steve H. Hanke lays out the case authoritatively in his short essay On Democracy Versus Liberty, focused upon the American experience:

Most people, including most Americans, would be surprised to learn that the word "democracy" does not appear in the Declaration of Independence (1776) or the Constitution of the United States of America (1789). They would also be shocked to learn the reason for the absence of the word democracy in the

founding documents of the U.S.A. Contrary to what propaganda has led the public to believe, America's Founding Fathers were skeptical and anxious about democracy. They were aware of the evils that accompany a tyranny of the majority. The Framers of the Constitution went to great lengths to ensure that the federal government was not based on the will of the majority and was not, therefore, democratic.

If the Framers of the Constitution did not embrace democracy, what did they adhere to? To a man, the Framers agreed that the purpose of government was to secure citizens in John Locke's trilogy of the rights to life, liberty and property.

He elaborates:

The Constitution is primarily a structural and procedural document that itemizes who is to exercise power and how they are to exercise it. A great deal of stress is placed on the separation of powers and the checks and balances in the system. These were not a Cartesian construct or formula aimed at social engineering, but a shield to protect the people from the government. In short, the Constitution was designed to govern the government, not the people.

The Bill of Rights establishes the rights of the people against infringements by the State. The only thing that the citizens can demand from the State, under the Bill of Rights, is for a trial by a jury. The rest of the citizens' rights are protections from the State. For roughly a century after the Constitution was ratified, private property, contracts and free internal trade within the United States were sacred. The scope and scale of the government remained very constrained. All this was very consistent with what was understood to be liberty.

As the spirit of reaction digs its Sith-tentacles into the brain, it becomes difficult to remember how the classical (or non-communist) progressive narrative could once have made sense. What were people thinking? What were they expecting from the emerging super-empowered, populist, cannibalistic state? Wasn't the eventual calamity entirely predictable? How was it ever possible to be a Whig?

The ideological credibility of radical democratization is not, of course, in question. As thinkers ranging from (Christian progressive) Walter Russell Mead to (atheistic reactionary) Mencius Moldbug have exhaustively detailed, it conforms so exactly to ultra-protestant religious enthusiasm that its power to animate the revolutionary soul should surprise nobody. Within just a few years of Martin Luther's challenge to the papal

establishment, peasant insurrectionists were stringing up their class enemies all over Germany.

The empirical credibility of democratic advancement is far more perplexing, and also genuinely complex (which is to say controversial, or more precisely, worthy of a data-based, rigorously-argued controversy). In part, that is because the modern configuration of democracy emerges within the sweep of a far broader modernistic trend, whose techno-scientific, economic, social and political strands are obscurely interrelated, knitted together by misleading correlations, and subsequent false causalities. If, as Schumpeter argues, industrial capitalism tends to engender a democratic-bureaucratic culture that concludes in stagnation, it might nevertheless seem as though democracy was 'associated' with material progress. It is easy to misconstrue a lagging indicator as a positive causal factor, especially when ideological zeal lends its bias to the misapprehension. In similar vein, since cancer only afflicts living beings, it might – with apparent reason — be associated with vitality.

Robin Hanson (gently) notes:

Yes many trends have been positive for a century or so, and yes this suggests they will continue to rise for a century or so. But no this does not mean that students are empirically or morally

wrong for thinking it "utopian fantasy" that one could "end poverty, disease, tyranny, and war" by joining a modern-day Kennedy's political quest. Why? Because positive recent trends in these areas were not much caused by such political movements! They were mostly caused by our getting rich from the industrial revolution, an event that political movements tended, if anything, to try to hold back on average.

Simple historical chronology suggests that industrialization supports progressive democratization, rather than being derived from it. This observation has even given rise to a widely accepted school of pop social science theorizing, according to which the 'maturation' of societies in a democratic direction is determined by thresholds of affluence, or middle-class formation. The strict logical correlate of such ideas, that democracy is fundamentally non-productive in relation to material progress, is typically under-emphasized. Democracy consumes progress. When perceived from the perspective of the dark enlightenment, the appropriate mode of analysis for studying the democratic phenomenon is general parasitology.

Quasi-libertarian responses to the outbreak accept this implicitly. Given a population deeply infected by the zombie virus and shambling into cannibalistic social collapse, the preferred option is quarantine. It is not communicative isolation that is essential,

but a functional dis-solidarization of society that tightens feedback loops and exposes people with maximum intensity to the consequences of their own actions. Social solidarity, in precise contrast, is the parasite's friend. By cropping out all high-frequency feedback mechanisms (such as market signals), and replacing them with sluggish, infra-red loops that pass through a centralized forum of 'general will', a radically democratized society insulates parasitism from what it does, transforming local, painfully dysfunctional, intolerable, and thus urgently corrected behavior patterns into global, numbed, and chronic socio-political pathologies.

Gnaw off other people's body parts and it might be hard to get a job– that's the kind of lesson a tight-feedback, cybernetically intense, laissez faire order would allow to be learned. It's also exactly the kind of insensitive zombiphobic discrimination that any compassionate democracy would denounce as thought crime, whilst boosting the public budget for the vitally-challenged, undertaking consciousness raising campaigns on behalf of those suffering from involuntary cannibalistic impulse syndrome, affirming the dignity of the zombie lifestyle in higher-education curriculums, and rigorously regulating workspaces to ensure that the shuffling undead are not victimized by profit-obsessed, performance-centric, or even unreconstructed animationist employers.

As enlightened zombie-tolerance flourishes in the shelter of the democratic mega-parasite, a small remnant of reactionaries, attentive to the effects of real incentives, raise the formulaic question: "You do realize that these policies lead inevitably to a massive expansion of the zombie population?" The dominant vector of history presupposes that such nuisance objections are marginalized, ignored, and — wherever possible – silenced through social ostracism. The remnant either fortifies the basement, whilst stocking up on dried food, ammunition, and silver coins, or accelerates the application process for a second passport, and starts packing its bags.

If all of this seems to be coming unmoored from historical concreteness, there's a conveniently topical remedy: a little digressive channel-hopping over to Greece. As a microcosmic model for the death of the West, playing out in real time, the Greek story is hypnotic. It describes a 2,500 year arc that is far from neat, but irresistibly dramatic, from proto-democracy to accomplished zombie apocalypse. Its pre-eminent virtue is that it perfectly illustrates the democratic mechanism in extremis, separating individuals and local populations from the consequences of their decisions by scrambling their behavior through large-scale, centralized re-distribution systems. You

decide what you do, but then vote on the consequences. How could anyone say 'no' to that?

No surprise that over 30 years of EU membership Greeks have been eagerly cooperating with a social-engineering mega-project that strips out all short-wave social signals and re-routes feedback through the grandiose circuitry of European solidarity, ensuring that all economically-relevant information is red-shifted through the heat-death sump of the European Central Bank. Most specifically, it has conspired with 'Europe' to obliterate all information that might be contained in Greek interest rates, thus effectively disabling all financial feedback on domestic policy choices.

This is democracy in a consummate form that defies further perfection, since nothing conforms more exactly to the 'general will' than the legislative abolition of reality, and nothing delivers the hemlock to reality more definitively than the coupling of Teutonic interest rates with East Mediterranean spending decisions. Live like Hellenes and pay like Germans — any political party that failed to rise to power on that platform deserves to scrabble for vulture-picked scraps in the wilderness. It's the ultimate no-brainer, in just about every imaginable sense of that expression. What could possibly go wrong?

More to the point, what did go wrong? Mencius Moldbug begins his Unqualified Reservations series How Dawkins got pwned (or taken over through an "exploitable vulnerability") with the outlining of design rules for a hypothetical "optimal memetic parasite" that would be "as virulent as possible. It will be highly contagious, highly morbid, and highly persistent. A really ugly bug." In comparison to this ideological super-plague, the vestigial monotheism derided in The God Delusion would figure as nothing worse than a moderately unpleasant head cold. What begins as abstract meme tinkering concludes as grand-sweep history, in the dark enlightenment mode:

My belief is that Professor Dawkins is not just a Christian atheist. He is a Protestant atheist. And he is not just a Protestant atheist. He is a Calvinist atheist. And he is not just a Calvinist atheist. He is an Anglo-Calvinist atheist. In other words, he can be also described as a Puritan atheist, a Dissenter atheist, a Nonconformist atheist, an Evangelical atheist, etc, etc.

This cladistic taxonomy traces Professor Dawkins' intellectual ancestry back about 400 years, to the era of the English Civil War. Except of course for the atheism theme, Professor Dawkins' kernel is a remarkable match for the Ranter, Leveller, Digger, Quaker, Fifth Monarchist, or any of the more extreme

English Dissenter traditions that flourished during the Cromwellian interregnum.

Frankly, these dudes were freaks. Maniacal fanatics. Any mainstream English thinker of the 17th, 18th or 19th century, informed that this tradition (or its modern descendant) is now the planet's dominant Christian denomination, would regard this as a sign of imminent apocalypse. If you're sure they're wrong, you're more sure than me.

Fortunately, Cromwell himself was comparatively moderate. The extreme ultra-Puritan sects never got a solid lock on power under the Protectorate. Even more fortunately, Cromwell got old and died, and Cromwellism died with him. Lawful government was restored to Great Britain, as was the Church of England, and Dissenters became a marginal fringe again. And frankly, a damned good riddance it was.

However, you can't keep a good parasite down. A community of Puritans fled to America and founded the theocratic colonies of New England. After its military victories in the American Rebellion and the War of Secession, American Puritanism was well on the way to world domination. Its victories in World War I, World War II, and the Cold War confirmed its global hegemony. All legitimate mainstream thought on Earth today is

descended from the American Puritans, and through them the English Dissenters.

Given the rise of this "really ugly bug" to world dominion, it might seem strange to pick on tangential figure such as Dawkins, but Moldbug selects his target for exquisitely-judged strategic reasons. Moldbug identifies with Dawkins' Darwinism, with his intellectual repudiation of Abrahamic theism, and with his broad commitment to scientific rationality. Yet he recognizes, crucially, that Dawkins' critical faculties shut off – abruptly and often comically – at the point where they might endanger a still broader commitment to hegemonic progressivism. In this way, Dawkins is powerfully indicative. Militant secularism is itself a modernized variant of the Abrahamic meta-meme, on its Anglo-Protestant, radical democratic taxonomic branch, whose specific tradition is anti-traditionalism. The clamorous atheism of The God Delusion represents a protective feint, and a consistent upgrade of religious reformation, guided by a spirit of progressive enthusiasm that trumps empiricism and reason, whilst exemplifying an irritable dogmatism that rivals anything to be found in earlier God-themed strains.

Dawkins isn't merely an enlightened modern progressive and implicit radical democrat, he's an impressively credentialed

scientist, more specifically a biologist, and (thus) a Darwinian evolutionist. The point at which he touches the limit of acceptable thinking as defined by the memetic super-bug is therefore quite easy to anticipate. His inherited tradition of low-church ultra-protestantism has replaced God with Man as the locus of spiritual investment, and 'Man' has been in the process of Darwinian research dissolution for over 150 years. (As the sound, decent person I know you are, having gotten this far with Moldbug you're probably already muttering under your breath, don't mention race, don't mention race, don't mention race, please, oh please, in the name of the Zeitgeist and the dear sweet non-god of progress, don't mention race …) … but Moldbug is already citing Dawkins, citing Thomas Huxley "…in a contest which is to be carried out by thoughts and not by bites. The highest places in the hierarchy of civilization will assuredly not be within the reach of our dusky cousins." Which Dawkins frames by remarking: "Had Huxley… been born and educated in our time, [he] would have been the first to cringe with us at [his] Victorian sentiments and unctuous tone. I quote them only to illustrate how the Zeitgeist moves on."

It gets worse. Moldbug seems to be holding Huxley's hand, and … (ewww!) doing that palm-stroking thing with his finger. This sure ain't vanilla-libertarian reaction anymore — it's getting seriously dark, and scary. "In all seriousness, what is the

evidence for fraternism? Why, exactly, does Professor Dawkins believe that all neohominids are born with identical potential for neurological development? He doesn't say. Perhaps he thinks it's obvious."

Whatever one's opinion on the respective scientific merits of human biological diversity or uniformity, it is surely beyond contention that the latter assumption, alone, is tolerated. Even if progressive-universalistic beliefs about human nature are true, they are not held because they are true, or arrived at through any process that passes the laugh test for critical scientific rationality. They are received as religious tenets, with all of the passionate intensity that characterizes essential items of faith, and to question them is not a matter of scientific inaccuracy, but of what we now call political incorrectness, and once knew as heresy.

To sustain this transcendent moral posture in relation to racism is no more rational than subscription to the doctrine of original sin, of which it is, in any case, the unmistakable modern substitute. The difference, of course, is that 'original sin' is a traditional doctrine, subscribed to by an embattled social cohort, significantly under-represented among public intellectuals and media figures, deeply unfashionable in the dominant world culture, and widely criticized – if not derided – without any

immediate assumption that the critic is advocating murder, theft, or adultery. To question the status of racism as the supreme and defining social sin, on the other hand, is to court universal condemnation from social elites, and to arouse suspicions of thought crimes that range from pro-slavery apologetics to genocide fantasies. Racism is pure or absolute evil, whose proper sphere is the infinite and the eternal, or the incendiary sinful depths of the hyper-protestant soul, rather than the mundane confines of civil interaction, social scientific realism, or efficient and proportional legality. The dissymmetry of affect, sanction, and raw social power attending old heresies and their replacements, once noticed, is a nagging indicator. A new sect reigns, and it is not even especially well hidden.

Yet even among the most hardened HBD constituencies, hysterical sanctification of plus-good race-think hardly suffices to lend radical democracy the aura of profound morbidity that Moldbug detects. That requires a devotional relation to the State.

The Dark Enlightenment (Part 3)

MARCH 19, 2012

The previous installment of this series ended with our hero Mencius Moldbug, up to his waist (or worse) in the mephitic swamp of political incorrectness, approaching the dark heart of his politico-religious meditation on How Dawkins Got Pwned. Moldbug has caught Dawkins in the midst of a symptomatically significant, and excruciatingly sanctimonious, denunciation of Thomas Huxley's racist "Victorian sentiments" – a sermon which concludes with the strange declaration that he is quoting Huxley's words, despite their self-evident and wholly intolerable ghastliness, "only to illustrate how the Zeitgeist moves on."

Moldbug pounces, asking pointedly: "What, exactly, is this Zeitgeist thing?" It is, indisputably, an extraordinary catch. Here is a thinker (Dawkins), trained as a biologist, and especially

fascinated by the (disjunctively) twinned topics of naturalistic evolution and Abrahamic religion, stumbling upon what he apprehends as a one-way trend of world-historical spiritual development, which he then – emphatically, but without the slightest appeal to disciplined reason or evidence – denies has any serious connection to the advance of science, human biology, or religious tradition. The stammering nonsense that results is a thing of wonder, but for Moldbug it all makes sense:

In fact, Professor Dawkins' Zeitgeist is … indistinguishable from … the old Anglo-Calvinist or Puritan concept of Providence. Perhaps this is a false match. But it's quite a close one.

Another word for Zeitgeist is Progress. It's unsurprising that Universalists tend to believe in Progress– in fact, in a political context, they often call themselves progressives. Universalism has indeed made quite a bit of progress since [the time of Huxley's embarrassing remark in] 1913. But this hardly refutes the proposition that Universalism is a parasitic tradition. Progress for the tick is not progress for the dog.

What, exactly, is this Zeitgeist thing? The question bears repeating. Is it not astounding, to begin with, that when one English Darwinian reaches for a weapon to club another, the

most convenient cudgel to hand should be a German word — associated with an abstruse lineage of state-worshipping idealistic philosophy — explicitly referencing a conception of historical time that has no discernible connection to the process of naturalistic evolution? It is as if, scarcely imaginably, during a comparable contention among physicists (on the topic of quantum indeterminacy), one should suddenly hear it shouted that "God does not play dice with the universe." In fact, the two examples are intimately entangled, since Dawkins' faith in the Zeitgeist is combined with adherence to the dogmatic progressivism of 'Einsteinian Religion' (meticulously dissected, of course, by Moldbug).

The shamelessness is remarkable, or at least it would be, were it naively believed that the protocols of scientific rationality occupied sovereign position in such disputation, if only in principle. In fact – and here irony is amplified to the very brink of howling psychosis – Einstein's Old One still reigns. The criteria of judgment owe everything to neo-puritan spiritual hygiene, and nothing whatsoever to testable reality. Scientific utterance is screened for conformity to a progressive social agenda, whose authority seems to be unaffected by its complete indifference to scientific integrity. It reminds Moldbug of Lysenko, for understandable reasons.

"If the facts do not agree with the theory, so much worse for the facts" Hegel asserted. It is the Zeitgeist that is God, historically incarnated in the state, trampling mere data back into the dirt. By now, everybody knows where this ends. An egalitarian moral ideal, hardened into a universal axiom or increasingly incontestable dogma, completes modernity's supreme historical irony by making 'tolerance' the iron criterion for the limits of (cultural) toleration. Once it is accepted universally, or, speaking more practically, by all social forces wielding significant cultural power, that intolerance is intolerable, political authority has legitimated anything and everything convenient to itself, without restraint.

That is the magic of the dialectic, or of logical perversity. When only tolerance is tolerable, and everyone (who matters) accepts this manifestly nonsensical formula as not only rationally intelligible, but as the universally-affirmed principle of modern democratic faith, nothing except politics remains. Perfect tolerance and absolute intolerance have become logically indistinguishable, with either equally interpretable as the other, A = not-A, or the inverse, and in the nakedly Orwellian world that results, power alone holds the keys of articulation. Tolerance has progressed to such a degree that it has become a social police function, providing the existential pretext for new inquisitional institutions. ("We must remember that those who

tolerate intolerance abuse tolerance itself, and an enemy of tolerance is an enemy of democracy," Moldbug ironizes.)

The spontaneous tolerance that characterized classical liberalism, rooted in a modest set of strictly negative rights that restricted the domain of politics, or government intolerance, surrenders during the democratic surge-tide to a positive right to be tolerated, defined ever more expansively as substantial entitlement, encompassing public affirmations of dignity, state-enforced guarantees of equal treatment by all agents (public and private), government protections against non-physical slights and humiliations, economic subsidies, and – ultimately – statistically proportional representation within all fields of employment, achievement, and recognition. That the eschatological culmination of this trend is simply impossible matters not at all to the dialectic. On the contrary, it energizes the political process, combusting any threat of policy satiation in the fuel of infinite grievance. "I will not cease from Mental Fight, Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand: Till we have built Jerusalem, In England's green and pleasant land." Somewhere before Jerusalem is reached, the inarticulate pluralism of a free society has been transformed into the assertive multiculturalism of a soft-totalitarian democracy.

The Jews of 17th century Amsterdam, or the Huguenots of 18th century London, enjoyed the right to be left alone, and enriched their host societies in return. The democratically-empowered grievance groups of later modern times are incited by political leaders to demand a (fundamentally illiberal) right to be heard, with social consequences that are predominantly malignant. For politicians, however, who identify and promote themselves as the voice of the unheard and the ignored, the self-interest at stake could hardly be more obvious.

Tolerance, which once presupposed neglect, now decries it, and in so doing becomes its opposite. Were this a partisan development, partisan politics of a democratic kind might sustain the possibility of reversion, but it is nothing of the kind. "When someone is hurting, government has got to move" declared 'compassionate conservative' US President George W. Bush, in a futile effort to channel the Cathedral. When the 'right' sounds like this it is not only dead, but unmistakably reeking of advanced decomposition. 'Progress' has won, but is that bad? Moldbug approaches the question rigorously:

If a tradition causes its hosts to make miscalculations that compromise their personal goals, it exhibits Misesian morbidity. If it causes its hosts to act in ways that compromise their genes' reproductive interests, it exhibits Darwinian morbidity. If

subscribing to the tradition is individually advantageous or neutral (defectors are rewarded, or at least unpunished) but collectively harmful, the tradition is parasitic. If subscribing is individually disadvantageous but collectively beneficial, the tradition is altruistic. If it is both individually and collectively benign, it is symbiotic. If it is both individually and collectively harmful, it is malignant. Each of these labels can be applied to either Misesian or Darwinian morbidity. A theme that is arational, but does not exhibit either Misesian or Darwinian morbidity, is trivially morbid.

Behaviorally considered, the Misesian and Darwinian systems are clusters of 'selfish' incentives, oriented respectively to property accumulation and gene propagation. Whilst the Darwinians conceive the 'Misesian' sphere as a special case of genetically self-interested motivation, the Austrian tradition, rooted in highly rationalized neo-kantian anti-naturalism, is pre-disposed to resist such reductionism. Whilst the ultimate implications of this contest are considerable, under current conditions it is a squabble of minor urgency, since both formations are united in 'hate', which is to say, in their reactionary tolerance for incentive structures that punish the maladapted.

'Hate' is a word to pause over. It testifies with special clarity to the religious orthodoxy of the Cathedral, and its peculiarities merit careful notice. Perhaps its most remarkable feature is its perfect redundancy, when evaluated from the perspective of any analysis of legal and cultural norms that is not enflamed by neo-puritan evangelical enthusiasm. A 'hate crime', if it is anything at all, is just a crime, plus 'hate', and what the 'hate' adds is telling. To restrict ourselves, momentarily, to examples of uncontroversial criminality, one might ask: what is it exactly that aggravates a murder, or assault, if the motivation is attributed to 'hate'? Two factors seem especially prominent, and neither has any obvious connection to common legal norms.

Firstly, the crime is augmented by a purely ideational, ideological, or even 'spiritual' element, attesting not only to a violation of civilized conduct, but also to a heretical intention. This facilitates the complete abstraction of hate from criminality, whereupon it takes the form of 'hate-speech' or simply 'hate' (which is always to be contrasted with the 'passion', 'outrage', or righteous 'anger' represented by critical, controversial, or merely abusive language directed against unprotected groups, social categories, or individuals). 'Hate' is an offense against the Cathedral itself, a refusal of its spiritual guidance, and a mental act of defiance against the manifest religious destiny of the world.

Secondly, and relatedly, 'hate' is deliberately and even strategically asymmetrical in respect to the equilibrium political polarity of advanced democratic societies. Between the relentless march of progress and the ineffective grouching of conservatism it does not vacillate. As we have seen, only the right can 'hate'. As the doxological immunity system of 'hate' suppression is consolidated within elite educational and media systems, the highly selective distribution of protections ensures that 'discourse' – especially empowered discourse – is ratcheted consistently to the left, which is to say, in the direction of an ever more comprehensively radicalized Universalism. The morbidity of this trend is extreme.

Because grievance status is awarded as political compensation for economic incompetence, it constructs an automatic cultural mechanism that advocates for dysfunction. The Universalist creed, with its reflex identification of inequality with injustice, can conceive no alternative to the proposition that the lower one's situation or status, the more compelling is one's claim upon society, the purer and nobler one's cause. Temporal failure is the sign of spiritual election (Marxo-Calvinism), and to dispute any of this is clearly 'hate'.

This does not compel even the most hard-hearted neo-reactionary to suggest, in a caricature of the high Victorian cultural style, that social disadvantage, as manifested in political violence, criminality, homelessness, insolvency, and welfare dependency, is a simple index of moral culpability. In large part – perhaps overwhelmingly large part – it reflects sheer misfortune. Dim, impulsive, unhealthy, and unattractive people, reared chaotically in abusive families, and stranded in broken, crime-wracked communities, have every reason to curse the gods before themselves. Besides, disaster can strike anyone.

In regards to effective incentive structures, however, none of this is of the slightest importance. Behavioral reality knows only one iron law: Whatever is subsidized is promoted. With a necessity no weaker than that of entropy itself, insofar as social democracy seeks to soften bad consequences – for major corporations no less than for struggling individuals or hapless cultures — things get worse. There is no way around, or beyond this formula, only wishful thinking, and complicity with degeneration. Of course, this defining reactionary insight is doomed to inconsequence, since it amounts to the supremely unpalatable conclusion that every attempt at 'progressive' improvement is fated to reverse itself, 'perversely', into horrible failure. No democracy could accept this, which means that every democracy will fail.

The excited spiral of Misesian-Darwinian degenerative runaway is neatly captured in the words of the world's fluffiest Beltway libertarian, Megan McArdle, writing in core Cathedral-mouthpiece The Atlantic:

It is somewhat ironic that the first serious strains caused by Europe's changing demographics are showing up in the Continent's welfare budgets, because the pension systems themselves may well have shaped, and limited, Europe's growth. The 20th century saw international adoption of social-security systems that promised defined benefits paid out of future tax revenue—known to pension experts as "paygo" systems, and to critics as Ponzi schemes. These systems have greatly eased fears of a destitute old age, but multiple studies show that as social-security systems become more generous (and old age more secure), people have fewer children. By one estimate, 50 to 60 percent of the difference between America's (above-replacement) birthrate and Europe's can be explained by the latter's more generous systems. In other words, Europe's pension system may have set in motion the very demographic decline that helped make that system—and some European governments—insolvent.

Despite McArdle's ridiculous suggestion that the United States of America has in some way exempted itself from Europe's mortuary path, the broad outline of the diagnosis is clear, and increasingly accepted as commonsensical (although best ignored). According to the rising creed, welfare attained through progeny and savings is non-universal, and thus morally-benighted. It should be supplanted, as widely and rapidly as possible, by universal benefits or 'positive rights' distributed universally to the democratic citizen and thus, inevitably, routed through the altruistic State. If as a result, due to the irredeemable political incorrectness of reality, economies and populations should collapse in concert, at least it will not damage our souls. Oh democracy! You saccharine-sweet dying idiot, what do you think the zombie hordes will care for your soul?

Moldbug comments:

Universalism, in my opinion, is best described as a mystery cult of power.

It's a cult of power because one critical stage in its replicative lifecycle is a little critter called the State. When we look at the big U's surface proteins, we notice that most of them can be explained by its need to capture, retain, and maintain the State, and direct its powers toward the creation of conditions that

favor the continued replication of Universalism. It's as hard to imagine Universalism without the State as malaria without the mosquito.

It's a mystery cult because it displaces theistic traditions by replacing metaphysical superstitions with philosophical mysteries, such as humanity, progress, equality, democracy, justice, environment, community, peace, etc.

None of these concepts, as defined in orthodox Universalist doctrine, is even slightly coherent. All can absorb arbitrary mental energy without producing any rational thought. In this they are best compared to Plotinian, Talmudic, or Scholastic nonsense.

As a bonus, here's the Urban Feature guide to the main sequence of modern political regimes:

Regime (1) Communist Tyranny
Typical Growth: ~0%
Voice / Exit: Low / Low
Cultural climate: Pyschotic utopianism
Life is … hard but 'fair'
Transition mechanism: Re-discovers markets at economic degree-zero

Regime (2) Authoritarian Capitalism
Typical Growth: 5-10%
Voice / Exit: Low / High
Cultural climate: Flinty realism
Life is … hard but productive
Transition mechanism: Pressurized by the Cathedral to democratize

Regime (3) Social Democracy
Typical Growth: 0-3%
Voice / Exit: High / High
Cultural climate: Sanctimonious dishonesty
Life is … soft and unsustainable
Transition mechanism: Can-kicking runs out of road

Regime (4) Zombie Apocalypse
Typical Growth: N/A
Voice / Exit: High (mostly useless screaming) / High (with fuel, ammo, dried food, precious metal coins)
Cultural climate: Survivalism
Life is … hard-to-impossible
Transition mechanism: Unknown

For all regimes, growth expectations assume moderately competent population, otherwise go straight to (4)

The Dark Enlightenment (Part 4)

APRIL 1, 2012

Re-running the race to ruin.

Liberals are baffled and infuriated that poor whites vote Republican, yet voting on tribal grounds is a feature of all multi-ethnic democracies, whether [in] Northern Ireland, Lebanon or Iraq. The more a majority becomes a minority the more tribal its voting becomes, so that increasingly the Republicans have become the "white party"; making this point indelicately got Pat Buchanan the sack, but many others make it too.

Will it happen here [in the UK]? The patterns are not dissimilar. In the 2010 election the Conservatives won only 16 per cent of the ethnic minority vote, while Labour won the support of 72 per cent of Bangladeshis, 78 per cent of African-Caribbeans and

87 per cent of Africans. The Tories are slightly stronger among British Hindus and Sikhs – mirroring Republican support among Asian-Americans – who are more likely to be home-owning professionals and feel less alienated.

The Economist recently asked if the Tories had a "race problem", but it may just be that democracy has a race problem. — Ed West (here)

Without a taste for irony, Mencius Moldbug is all but unendurable, and certainly unintelligible. Vast structures of historical irony shape his writings, at times even engulfing them. How otherwise could a proponent of traditional configurations of social order – a self-proclaimed Jacobite – compose a body of work that is stubbornly dedicated to subversion?

Irony is Moldbug's method, as well as his milieu. This can be seen, most tellingly, in his chosen name for the usurped enlightenment, the dominant faith of the modern world: Universalism. This is a word that he appropriates (and capitalizes) within a reactionary diagnosis whose entire force lies in its exposure of an exorbitant particularity.

Moldbug turns continually to history (or, more rigorously, cladistics), to accurately specify that which asserts its own

universal significance whilst ascending to a state of general dominance that approaches the universal. Under this examination, what counts as Universal reason, determining the direction and meaning of modernity, is revealed as the minutely determined branch or sub-species of a cultic tradition, descended from 'ranters', 'levelers', and closely related variants of dissident, ultra-protestant fanaticism, and owing vanishingly little to the conclusions of logicians.

Ironically, then, the world's regnant Universalist democratic-egalitarian faith is a particular or peculiar cult that has broken out, along identifiable historical and geographical pathways, with an epidemic virulence that is disguised as progressive global enlightenment. The route that it has taken, through England and New England, Reformation and Revolution, is recorded by an accumulation of traits that provide abundant material for irony, and for lower varieties of comedy. The unmasking of the modern 'liberal' intellectual or 'open-minded' media 'truth-teller' as a pale, fervent, narrowly doctrinaire puritan, recognizably descended from the species of witch-burning zealots, is reliably – and irresistibly – entertaining.

Yet, as the Cathedral extends and tightens its grip upon everything, everywhere, in accordance with its divine mandate, the response it triggers is only atypically humorous. More

commonly, when unable to exact humble compliance, it encounters inarticulate rage, or at least uncomprehending, smoldering resentment, as befits the imposition of parochial cultural dogmas, still wrapped in the trappings of a specific, alien pedigree, even as they earnestly confess to universal rationality.

Consider, for instance, the most famous words of America's Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights …" Could it be honestly maintained that to submit, scrupulously and sincerely, to such 'self-evident' truths amounts to anything other than an act of religious re-confirmation or conversion? Or denied that, in these words, reason and evidence are explicitly set aside, to make room for principles of faith? Could anything be less scientific than such a declaration, or more indifferent to the criteria of genuinely universal reasoning? How could anybody who was not already a believer be expected to consent to such assumptions?

That the founding statement of the democratic-republican creed should be formulated as a statement of pure (and doctrinally recognizable) faith is information of sorts, but it is not yet irony. The irony begins with the fact that among the elites of today's Cathedral, these words of the Declaration of Independence (as

well as many others) would be found – almost universally – to be quaintly suggestive at best, perhaps vaguely embarrassing, and most certainly incapable of supporting literal assent. Even amongst libertarian-slanted conservatives, a firm commitment to 'natural rights' is unlikely to proceed confidently and emphatically to their divine origination. For modern 'liberals', believers in the rights-bestowing (or entitlement) State, such archaic ideas are not only absurdly dated, but positively obstructive. For that reason, they are associated less with revered predecessors than with the retarded, fundamentalist thinking of political enemies. Sophisticates of the Cathedral core understand, as Hegel did, that God is no more than deep government apprehended by infants, and as such a waste of faith (that bureaucrats could put to better use).

Since the Cathedral has ascended to global supremacy, it no longer has need for Founding Fathers, who awkwardly recall its parochial ancestry, and impede its transnational public relations. Rather, it seeks perpetual re-invigoration through their denigration. The phenomenon of the 'New Atheism', with its transparent progressive affiliations, attests abundantly to this. Paleo-puritanism must be derided in order for neo-puritanism to flourish – the meme is dead, long live the meme!

At the limit of self-parody, neo-puritan parricide takes the form of the ludicrous 'War on Christmas', in which the allies of the Cathedral sanctify the (radically unthreatened) separation of Church and State through nuisance agitation against public expressions of traditional Christian piety, and their 'Red State' dupes respond with dyspeptic outrage on cable TV shows. Like every other war against fuzzy nouns (whether 'poverty', 'drugs', or 'terror'), the outcome is predictably perverse. If resistance to the War on Christmas is not yet established as the solid center of Yuletide festivities, it can be confidently expected to become so in the future. The purposes of the Cathedral are served nonetheless, through promotion of a synthetic secularism that separates the progressive faith from its religious foundations, whilst directing attention away from the ethnically specific, dogmatic creedal content at its core.

As reactionaries go, traditional Christians are generally considered to be quite cuddly. Even the most wild-eyed fanatics of the neo-puritan orthodoxy have trouble getting genuinely excited about them (although abortion activists get close). For some real red meat, with the nerves exposed and writhing to jolts of hard stimulation, it makes far more sense to turn to another discarded and ceremonially abominated block on the progressive lineage: White Identity Politics, or (the term Moldbug opts for) 'white nationalism'.

Just as the ratchet progress of neo-puritan social democracy is radically facilitated by the orchestrated pillorying of its embryonic religious forms, so is its trend to consistently neo-fascist political economy smoothed by the concerted repudiation of a 'neo-nazi' (or paleo-fascist) threat. It is extremely convenient, when constructing ever more nakedly corporatist or 'third position' structures of state-directed pseudo-capitalism, to be able to divert attention to angry expressions of white racial paranoia, especially when these are ornamented by clumsily modified nazi insignia, horned helmets, Leni Riefenstahl aesthetics, and slogans borrowed freely from Mein Kampf. In the United States (and thus, with shrinking time-lag, internationally) the icons of the Ku Klux Klan, from white bed-sheets, quasi-Masonic titles, and burning crosses, to lynching ropes, have acquired comparable theatrical value.

Moldbug offers a sanitized white nationalist blog reading list, consisting of writers who – to varying degrees of success – avoid immediate reversion to paleo-fascist self-parody. The first step beyond the boundary of respectable opinion is represented by Lawrence Auster, a Christian, anti-Darwinist, and 'Traditionalist Conservative' who defends 'substantial' (ethno-racial) national identity and opposes the liberal master-principle of nondiscrimination. By the time we reach 'Tanstaafl', at the

ripped outer edge of Moldbug's carefully truncated spectrum, we have entered a decaying orbit, spiraling into the great black hole that is hidden at the dead center of modern political possibility.

Before following the Tanstaafl-types into the crushing abyss where light dies, there are some preliminary remarks to make about the white nationalist perspective, and its implications. Even more than the Christian traditionalists (who, even in their cultural mid-winter, can bask in the warmth of supernatural endorsement), white identity politics considers itself besieged. Moderate or measured concern offers no equilibrium for those who cross the line, and begin to self-identify in these terms. Instead, the path of involvement demands rapid acceleration to a state of extreme alarm, or racial panic, conforming to an analysis focused upon malicious population replacement at the hands of a government which, in the oft-cited words of Bertolt Brecht, "has decided to dissolve the people, and to appoint another one." 'Whiteness' (whether conceived biologically, mystically, or both) is associated with vulnerability, fragility, and persecution. This theme is so basic, and so multifarious, that it is difficult to adequately address succinctly. It encompasses everything from criminal predation (especially racially-charged murders, rapes, and beatings), economic exactions and inverse discrimination, cultural aggression by hostile academic and

media systems, and ultimately 'genocide' – or definitive racial destruction.

Typically, the prospective annihilation of the white race is attributed to its own systematic vulnerability, whether due to characteristic cultural traits (excessive altruism, susceptibility to moral manipulation, excessive hospitality, trust, universal reciprocity, guilt, or individualistic disdain for group identity), or more immediate biological factors (recessive genes supporting fragile Aryan phenotypes). Whilst it is unlikely that this sense of unique endangerment is reducible to the chromatic formula 'White + Color = Color', the fundamental structure is of this kind. In its abstract depiction of non-reciprocal vulnerability, it reflects the 'one drop rule' (and Mendelian recessive / dominant gene combination). It depicts mixture as essentially anti-white.

Because 'whiteness' is a limit (pure absence of color), it slips smoothly from the biological factuality of the Caucasian sub-species into metaphysical and mystical ideas. Rather than accumulating genetic variation, a white race is contaminated or polluted by admixtures that compromise its defining negativity – to darken it is to destroy it. The mythological density of these — predominantly subliminal – associations invests white identity politics with a resilience that frustrates enlightened efforts at rationalistic denunciation, whilst contradicting its own paranoid

self-representation. It also undermines recent white nationalist promotions of a racial threat that is strictly comparable to that facing indigenous peoples, universally, and depicting whites as 'natives' cruelly deprived of equal protection against extinction. There is no route back to tribal innocence, or flat, biological diversity. Whiteness has been compacted indissolubly with ideology, whichever the road taken.

"If Blacks can have it, and Hispanics can have it, and Jews can have it, why can't we have it?" – That's the final building block of white nationalist grievance, the werewolf curse that means it can only ever be a monster. There's exactly one way out for persecuted palefaces, and it leads straight into a black hole. We promised to get back to Tanstaafl, and here we are, in late Summer 2007, shortly after he got 'the Jew thing'. There isn't anything very original about his epiphany, which is exactly the point. He quotes himself:

Isn't it absurd that anyone would even think to blame Christianity or WASPs for the rise of PC and its catastrophic consequences? Isn't this in fact a reversal of the truth? Hasn't the rise and spread of PC eroded the power of Christianity, WASPs, and whites in general? Blaming them is in effect blaming the victim.

Yes, there are Christians, WASPs, and whites who have fallen for the PC brainwashing. Yes, there are some who have taken it so deeply to heart that they work to expand and protect it. That's the nature of PC. That is its purpose. To control the minds of the people it seeks to destroy. The left, at its root, is all about destruction.

You don't have to be an anti-Semite to notice where these ideas originate from and who benefits. But you do have to violate PC to say: Jews.

That's the labyrinth, the trap, with its pitifully constricted, stereotypical circuit. "Why can't we be cuddly racial preservationists, like Amazonian Indians? How come we always turn into Neo-Nazis? It's some kind of conspiracy, which means it has to be the Jews." Since the mid-20th century, the political intensity of the globalized world has streamed, almost exclusively, out of the cratered ash-pile of the Third Reich. Until you get the pattern, it seems mysterious that there's no getting away from it. After listing some blogs falling under the relatively genteel category of 'white nationalism', Moldbug cautions:

The Internet is also home to many out-and-out racist blogs. Most are simply unreadable. But some are hosted by relatively capable writers … On these racist blogs you'll find racial

epithets, anti-Semitism (see why I am not an anti-Semite) and the like. Obviously, I cannot recommend any of these blogs, and nor will I link to them. However, if you are interested in the mind of the modern racist, Google will get you there.

Google is overkill. A little link-trawling will get you there. It's a 'six degrees of separation' problem (and more like two, or less). Start digging into the actually existing 'reactosphere', and things get quite astoundingly ugly very quickly. Yes, there really is 'hate', panic, and disgust, as well as a morbidly addictive abundance of very grim, vitriolic wit, and a disconcertingly impressive weight of credible fact (these guys just love statistics to death). Most of all, just beyond the horizon, there's the black hole. If reaction ever became a popular movement, its few slender threads of bourgeois (or perhaps dreamily 'aristocratic') civility wouldn't hold back the beast for long.

As liberal decency has severed itself from intellectual integrity, and exiled harsh truths, these truths have found new allies, and become considerably harsher. The outcome is mechanically, and monotonously, predictable. Every liberal democratic 'cause war' strengthens and feralizes what it fights. The war on poverty creates a chronically dysfunctional underclass. The war on drugs creates crystallized super-drugs and mega-mafias. Guess what? The war on political incorrectness creates data-empowered,

web-coordinated, paranoid and poly-conspiratorial werewolves, superbly positioned to take advantage of liberal democracy's impending rendezvous with ruinous reality, and to then play their part in the unleashing of unpleasantnesses that are scarcely imaginable (except by disturbing historical analogy). When a sane, pragmatic, and fact-based negotiation of human differences is forbidden by ideological fiat, the alternative is not a reign of perpetual peace, but a festering of increasingly self-conscious and militantantly defiant thoughtcrime, nourished by publicly unavowable realities, and energized by powerful, atavistic, and palpably dissident mythologies. That's obvious, on the 'Net.

Moldbug considers the danger of white nationalism to be both over- and understated. On the one hand, the 'menace' is simply ridiculous, and merely reflects neo-puritan spiritual dogma in its most hysterically oppressive and stubbornly mindless form. "It should be obvious that, although I am not a white nationalist, I am not exactly allergic to the stuff," Moldbug remarks, before describing it as "the most marginalized and socially excluded belief system in the history of the world … an obnoxious social irritant in any circle which does not include tattooed speedfreak bikers."

Yet the danger remains, or rather, is under construction.

I can imagine one possibility which might make white nationalism genuinely dangerous. White nationalism would be dangerous if there was some issue on which white nationalists were right, and everyone else was wrong. Truth is always dangerous. Contrary to common belief, it does not always prevail. But it's always a bad idea to turn your back on it. …While the evidence for human cognitive biodiversity is indeed debatable, what's not debatable is that it is debatable …[even though] everyone who is not a white nationalist has spent the last 50 years informing us that it is not debatable …

There's far more to Moldbug's essay, as there always is. Eventually it explains why he rejects white nationalism, on grounds that owe nothing to conventional reflexes. But the dark heart of the essay, lifting it beyond brilliance to the brink of genius, is found early on, at the edge of a black hole:

Why does white nationalism strike us as evil? Because Hitler was a white nationalist, and Hitler was evil. Neither of these statements is remotely controvertible. There is exactly one degree of separation between white nationalism and evil. And that degree is Hitler. Let me repeat: Hitler.

The argument seems watertight. (Hitlertight?) But it holds no water at all.

Why does socialism strike us as evil? Because Stalin was a socialist, and Stalin was evil. Anyone who wants to seriously argue that Stalin was less evil than Hitler has an awful long row to hoe. Not only did Stalin order more murders, his murder machine had its heyday in peacetime, whereas Hitler's can at least be seen as a war crime against enemy civilians. Whether this makes a difference can be debated, but if it does it puts Stalin on top.

And yet I have never had or seen anything like the "red flags" response to socialism ["the sense of the presence of evil"]. If I saw a crowd of young, fashionable people lining up at the box office for a hagiographic biopic on Reinhard Heydrich, chills would run up and down my neck. For Ernesto Guevara, I have no emotional response. Perhaps I think it's stupid and sad. I do think it's stupid and sad. But it doesn't freak me out.

Any attempt to be nuanced, balanced, or proportional in the moral case against Hitler is to entirely misconstrue the nature of the phenomenon. This can be noted, quite regularly, in Asian societies, for instance, because the ghost of the Third Reich does not occupy central position in their history, or rather, their

religion, although – as the inner sanctum of the Cathedral — it is determined to (and shows almost every sign of succeeding). A brief digression on cross-cultural misunderstanding and reciprocal blindness might be merited at this point. When Westerners pay attention to the 'God-Emperor' style of political devotion that has accompanied modern totalitarianism in East Asia, the conclusion typically drawn is that this pattern of political feeling is exotically alien, morbidly amusing, and ultimately – chillingly — incomprehensible. Contemporary comparisons with laughably non-numinous Western democratic leaders only deepen the confusion, as do clumsy quasi-Marxist references to 'feudal' sensibilities (as if absolute monarchy was not an alternative to feudalism, and as if absolute monarchs were worshipped). How could a historical and political figure ever be invested with the transcendent dignity of absolute religious meaning? It seems absurd …

"Look, I'm not saying that Hitler was a particularly nice guy …" – to imagine such word is already to see many things. It might even provoke the question: Does anybody within the (Cathedral's) globalized world still think that Adolf Hitler was less evil than the Prince of Darkness himself? Perhaps only a few scattered paleo-Christians (who stubbornly insist that Satan is really, really bad), and an even smaller number of Neo-Nazi ultras (who think Hitler was kind of cool). For pretty much

everybody else, Hitler perfectly personifies demonic monstrosity, transcending history and politics to attain the stature of a metaphysical absolute: evil incarnate. Beyond Hitler it is impossible to go, or think. This is surely interesting, since it indicates an irruption of the infinite within history – a religious revelation, of inverted, yet structurally familiar, Abrahamic type. ('Holocaust Theology' already implies as much.)

In this regard, rather than Satan, it might be more helpful to compare Hitler to the Antichrist, which is to say: to a mirror Messiah, of reversed moral polarity. There was even an empty tomb. Hitlerism, neutrally conceived, therefore, is less a pro-Nazi ideology than a universal faith, speciated within the Abrahamic super-family, and united in acknowledging the coming of pure evil on earth. Whilst not exactly worshipped (outside the extraordinarily disreputable circles already ventured into), Hitler is sacramentally abhorred, in a way that touches upon theological 'first things'. If to embrace Hitler as God is a sign of highly lamentable politico-spiritual confusion (at best), to recognize his historical singularity and sacred meaning is near-mandatory, since he is affirmed by all men of sound faith as the exact complement of the incarnate God (the revealed anti-Messiah, or Adversary), and this identification has the force of 'self-evident truth'. (Did anybody ever need to ask why the reductio ad Hitlerum works?)

Conveniently, like the secularized neo-puritanism that it swallows, (aversive) Hitlerism can be safely taught in American schools, at a remarkably high level of religious intensity. Insofar as progressive or programmatic history continues, this suggests that the Church of Sacred Hitlerite Abomination will eventually supplant its Abrahamic predecessors, to become the world's triumphant ecumenical faith. How could it not? After all, unlike vanilla deism, this is a faith that fully reconciles religious enthusiasm with enlightened opinion, equally adapted, with consummate amphibious capability, to the convulsive ecstasies of popular ritual and the letter pages of the New York Times. "Absolute evil once walked amongst us, and lives still …" How is this not, already, the principal religious message of our time? All that remains unfinished is the mythological consolidation, and that has long been underway.

There's still some bone-fragment picking to do among the ashes and debris [in Part 5], before turning to healthier things …

The Dark Enlightenment (Part 4a)

APRIL 19, 2012

A multi-part sub-digression into racial terror.

My own sense of the thing is that underneath the happy talk, underneath the dogged adherence to failed ideas and dead theories, underneath the shrieking and anathematizing at people like me, there is a deep and cold despair. In our innermost hearts, we don't believe racial harmony can be attained. Hence the trend to separation. We just want to get on with our lives away from each other. Yet for a moralistic, optimistic people like Americans, this despair is unbearable. It's pushed away somewhere we don't have to think about it. When someone forces us to think about it, we react with fury. That little boy in the Andersen story about the Emperor's new clothes? The

ending would be more true to life if he had been lynched by a howling mob of outraged citizens.
— John Derbyshire, interviewed at Gawker

We believe in the equal dignity and presumption of equal decency toward every person — no matter what race, no matter what science tells us about comparative intelligence, and no matter what is to be gleaned from crime statistics. It is important that research be done, that conclusions not be rigged, and that we are at liberty to speak frankly about what it tells us. But that is not an argument for a priori conclusions about how individual persons ought to be treated in various situations — or for calculating fear or friendship based on race alone. To hold or teach otherwise is to prescribe the disintegration of a pluralistic society, to undermine the aspiration of E Pluribus Unum.
— Andrew McCarthy, defending the expulsion of JD from the National Review

"The Talk" as black Americans and liberals present it (to wit: necessitated by white malice), is a comic affront — because no one is allowed (see Barro above) to notice the context in which black Americans are having run-ins with the law, each other, and others. The proper context for understanding this, and the mania that is the Trayvonicus for that matter, is the reasonable

fear of violence. This is the single most exigent fact here — yet you decree it must not be spoken.
— Dennis Dale, responding to Josh Barro's call for JD's 'firing'

Quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it? That's what it is to be a slave.
— Bladerunner

There is no part of Singapore, Hong Kong, Taipei, Shanghai, or very many other East Asian cities where it is impossible to wander, safely, late at night. Women, whether young or old, on their own or with small children, can be comfortably oblivious to the details of space and time, at least insofar as the threat of assault is concerned. Whilst this might not be quite sufficient to define a civilized society, it comes extremely close. It is certainly necessary to any such definition. The contrary case is barbarism.

These lucky cities of the western Pacific Rim are typified by geographical locations and demographic profiles that conspicuously echo the embarrassingly well-behaved 'model minorities' of Occidental countries. They are (non-obnoxiously) dominated by populations that – due to biological heredity, deep cultural traditions, or some inextricable entanglement of the two – find polite, prudent, and pacific social interactions comparatively effortless, and worthy of continuous

reinforcement. They are also, importantly, open, cosmopolitan societies, remarkably devoid of chauvinistic boorishness or paranoid ethno-nationalist sentiment. Their citizens are disinclined to emphasize their own virtues. On the contrary, they will typically be modest about their individual and collective attributes and achievements, abnormally sensitive to their failures and shortcomings, and constantly alert to opportunities for improvement. Complacency is almost as rare as delinquency. In these cities an entire — and massively consequential — dimension of social terror is simply absent.

In much of the Western world, in stark contrast, barbarism has been normalized. It is considered simply obvious that cities have 'bad areas' that are not merely impoverished, but lethally menacing to outsiders and residents alike. Visitors are warned to stay away, whilst locals do their best to transform their homes into fortresses, avoid venturing onto the streets after dark, and – especially if young and male — turn to criminal gangs for protection, which further degrades the security of everybody else. Predators control public space, parks are death traps, aggressive menace is celebrated as 'attitude', property acquisition is for mugs (or muggers), educational aspiration is ridiculed, and non-criminal business activity is despised as a violation of cultural norms. Every significant mechanism of socio-cultural pressure, from interpreted heritage and peer influences to

political rhetoric and economic incentives, is aligned to the deepening of complacent depravity and the ruthless extirpation of every impulse to self-improvement. Quite clearly, these are places where civilization has fundamentally collapsed, and a society that includes them has to some substantial extent failed.

Within the most influential countries of the English-speaking world, the disintegration of urban civilization has profoundly shaped the structure and development of cities. In many cases, the 'natural' (one might now say 'Asian') pattern, in which intensive urbanization and corresponding real estate values are greatest in the downtown core, has been shattered, or at least deeply deformed. Social disintegration of the urban center has driven an exodus of the (even moderately) prosperous to suburban and exurban refuges, producing a grotesque and historically unprecedented pattern of 'donut'-style development, with cities tolerating – or merely accommodating themselves to – ruined and rotting interiors, where sane people fear to tread. 'Inner city' has come to mean almost exactly the opposite of what an undistorted course of urban development would produce. This is the geographical expression of a Western – and especially American – social problem that is at once basically unmentionable and visible from outer space.

Surprisingly, the core-crashed donut syndrome has a notably insensitive yet commonly accepted name, which captures it in broad outlines – at least according to its secondary characteristics – and to a reasonable degree of statistical approximation: White Flight. This is an arresting term, for a variety of reasons. It is stamped, first of all, by the racial bi-polarity that – as a vital archaism – resonates with America's chronic social crisis at a number of levels. Whilst superficially outdated in an age of many-hued multicultural and immigration issues, it reverts to the undead code inherited from slavery and segregation, perpetually identified with Faulkner's words: "The past is not dead. It isn't even past." Yet even in this untypical moment of racial candor, blackness is elided, and implicitly disconnected from agency. It is denoted only by allusion, as a residue, concentrated passively and derivatively by the sifting function of a highly-adrenalized white panic. What cannot be said is indicated even as it is unmentioned. A distinctive silence accompanies the broken, half-expression of a mute tide of racial separatism, driven by civilizationally disabling terrors and animosities, whose depths, and structures of reciprocity, remain unavowable.

What the puritan exodus from Old to New World was to the foundation of Anglophone global modernity, white flight is to its fraying and dissolution. As with the pre-founding migration,

what gives white flight ineluctable relevance here is its sub-political character: all exit and no voice. It is the subtle, non-argumentative, non-demanding 'other' of social democracy and its dreams – the spontaneous impulse of dark enlightenment, as it is initially glimpsed, at once disillusioning and implacable.

The core-crashed donut is not the only model of sick city syndrome (the shanty fringe phenomenon emphasized in Mike Davis' Planet of Slums is very different). Nor is donut-disaster urbanism reducible to racial crisis, at least in its origins. Technological factors have played a crucial role (most prominently, automobile geography) as have quite other, long-standing cultural traditions (such as the construction of suburbia as a bourgeois idyll). Yet all such lineages have been in very large measure supplanted by, or at least subordinated to, the inherited, and still emerging, 'race problem.'

So what is this 'problem'? How is it developing? Why should anybody outside America be concerned about it? Why raise the topic now (if ever)? – If your heart is sinking under the gloomy suspicion this is going to be huge, meandering, nerve-wracking, and torturous, you're right. We've got weeks in this chamber of horrors to look forward to.

The two simplest, quite widely held, and basically incompatible answers to the first question deserve to be considered as important parts of the problem.

Question: What is America's race problem?

Answer-1: Black people.

Answer-2: White people.

The combined popularity of these options is significantly expanded, most probably to encompass a large majority of all Americans, when is taken to include those who assume that one of these two answers dominates the thinking of the other side. Between them, the propositions "The problem would be over if we could just rid ourselves of black hoodlums / white racists" and / or "They think we're all hoodlums / racists and want to get rid of us" consume an impressive proportion of the political spectrum, establishing a solid foundation of reciprocal terror and aversion. When defensive projections are added ("We're not hoodlums, you're racists" or "We're not racists, you're hoodlums"), the potential for super-heated, non-synthesizing dialectics approaches the infinite.

Not that these 'sides' are racial (except in black or white tribal-nationalist fantasy). For crude stereotypes, it is far more useful to turn to the principal political dimension, and its categories of 'liberal' and 'conservative' in the contemporary, American sense. To identify America's race problem with white racism is the stereotypical liberal position, whilst identifying it with black social dysfunction is the exact conservative complement. Although these stances are formally symmetrical, it is their actual political asymmentry that charges the American race problem with its extraordinary historical dynamism and universal significance.

That American whites and blacks – considered crudely as statistical aggregates — co-exist in a relation of reciprocal fear and perceived victimization, is attested by the manifest patterns of urban development and navigation, school choice, gun ownership, policing and incarceration, and just about every other expression of revealed (as opposed to stated) preference that is related to voluntary social distribution and security. An objective balance of terror reigns, erased from visibility by complementary yet incompatible perspectives of victimological supremacism and denial. Yet between the liberal and conservative positions on race there is no balance whatsoever, but something closer to a rout. Conservatives are utterly terrified of the issue, whilst for liberals it is a garden of earthly delight,

whose pleasures transcend the limits of human understanding. When any political discussion firmly and clearly arrives at the topic of race, liberalism wins. That is the fundamental law of ideological effectiveness in the shadow fragrant shade of the Cathedral. In certain respects, this dynamic political imbalance is even the primary phenomenon under consideration (and much more needs to be said about it, down the road).

The regular, excruciating, soul-crushing humiliation of conservatism on the race issue should come as no surprise to anybody. After all, the principal role of conservatism in modern politics is to be humiliated. That is what a perpetual loyal opposition, or court jester, is for. The essential character of liberalism, as guardian and proponent of neo-puritan spiritual truth, invests it with supreme mastery over the dialectic, or invulnerability to contradiction. That which it is impossible to think must necessarily be embraced, through faith. Consider only the fundamental doctrine or first article of the liberal creed, as promulgated through every public discussion, academic articulation, and legislative initiative relevant to the topic: Race doesn't exist, except as a social construct employed by one race to exploit and oppress another. Merely to entertain it is to shudder before the awesome majesty of the absolute, where everything is simultaneously its precise opposite, and reason evaporates ecstatically at the brink of the sublime.

If the world was built out of ideology, this story would already be over, or at least predictably programmed. Beyond the apparent zig-zag of the dialectic there is a dominant trend, heading in a single, unambiguous direction. Yet the liberal-progressive solution to the race problem – open-endedly escalating, comprehensively systematic, dynamically paradoxical 'anti-racism' – confronts a real obstacle that is only very partially reflected in conservative attitudes, rhetoric, and ideology. The real enemy, glacial, inchoate, and non-argumentative, is 'white flight'.

At this point, explicit reference to the Derbyshire Case becomes irresistible. There is a very considerable amount of complex, recent historical context that cries out for introduction – the cultural convulsion attending the Trayvon Martin incident in particular – but there'll be time for that later (oh yes, I'm afraid so). Derbyshire's intervention, and the explosion of words it provoked, while to some extent illuminated by such context, far exceeds it. That is because the crucial unspoken term, both in Derbyshire's now-notorious short article, and also — apparently — in the responses it generated, is 'white flight'. By publishing paternal advice to his (Eurasian) children that has been — not entirely unreasonably — summarized as 'avoid black people', he converted white flight from a much-lamented but seemingly

inexorable fact into an explicit imperative, even a cause. Don't argue, flee.

The word Derbyshire emphasizes, in his own penumbra of commentary, and in antecedent writings, is not 'flight' or 'panic', but despair. When asked by blogger Vox Day whether he agreed that the 'race card' had become less intimidating over the past two decades, Derbyshire replies:

One [factor], which I've written about more than once, I think, in the United States, is just despair. I am of a certain age, and I was around 50 years ago. I was reading the newspapers and following world events and I remember the civil rights movement. I was in England, but we followed it. I remember it, I remember what we felt about it, and what people were writing about it. It was full of hope. The idea in everyone's mind was that if we strike down these unjust laws and we outlaw all this discrimination, then we'll be whole. Then America will be made whole. After an intermediate period of a few years, who knows, maybe 20 years, with a hand up from things like affirmative action, black America will just merge into the general population and the whole thing will just go away. That's what everybody believed. Everybody thought that. And it didn't happen.

Here we are, we're 50 years later, and we've still got these tremendous disparities in crime rates, educational attainment, and so on. And I think, although they're still mouthing the platitudes, Americans in their hearts feel a kind of cold despair about it. They feel that Thomas Jefferson was probably right and we can't live together in harmony. I think that's why you see this slow ethnic disaggregation. We have a very segregated school system now. There are schools within 10 miles of where I'm sitting that are 98 percent minority. In residential housing too, it's the same thing. So I think there is a cold, dark despair lurking in America's collective heart about the whole thing.

This is a version of reality that few want to hear. As Derbyshire recognizes, Americans are a predominantly Christian, optimistic, 'can-do' people, whose 'collective heart' is unusually maladapted to an abandonment of hope. This is a country culturally hard-wired to interpret despair not merely as error or weakness, but as sin. Nobody who understands this could be remotely surprised to find bleak hereditarian fatalism being rejected — typically with vehement hostility — not only by progressives, but also by the overwhelming majority of conservatives. At NRO, Andrew C. McCarthy no doubt spoke for many in remarking:

There is a world of difference, though, between the need to be able to discuss uncomfortable facts about IQ and incarceration, on the one hand, and, on the other, to urge race as a rationale for abandoning basic Christian charity.

Others went much further. At the Examiner, James Gibson seized upon "John Derbyshire's vile racist screed" as the opportunity to teach a wider lesson – "the danger of conservatism divorced from Christianity":

… since Derbyshire does not believe "that Jesus of Nazareth was divine . . . and that the Resurrection was a real event,"; he cannot comprehend the great mystery of the Incarnation, whereby the Divine truly did take on human flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and suffered death at the hands of a fallen humanity in order to redeem that humanity out of its state of fallenness.

Herein lies the danger of a conservative socio-political philosophy divorced from a robust Christian faith. It becomes a dead ideology spawning a view of humanity that is toxic, fatalistic, and (as Derbyshire proves abundantly) uncharitable.

It was, of course, on the left that the fireworks truly ignited. Elspeth Reeve at the Atlantic Wire contended that Derbyshire

had clung on to his relation with the National Review because he was offering the magazine's "less enlightened readers" what they wanted: "dated racial stereotypes." Like Gibson on the right, she was keen for people to learn a wider lesson: don't think for a minute this stops with Derbyshire. (The stunningly uncooperative comments thread to her article is worth noting.)

At Gawker, Louis Peitzman jumped the shark (in the approved direction) by describing Derbyshire's "horrifying diatribe" as the "most racist article possible," a judgment that betrays extreme historical ignorance, a sheltered life, unusual innocence, and a lack of imagination, as well as making the piece sound far more interesting than it actually is. Peitzman's commentators are impeccably liberal, and of course uniformly, utterly, shatteringly appalled (to the point of orgasm). Beyond the emoting, Peitzman doesn't offer much content, excepting only a little extra emoting – this time mild satisfaction mixed with residual rage – at the news that Derbyshire's punishment has at least begun ("a step in the right direction") with his "canning" from the National Review.

Joanna Schroeder (writing at something called the Good Feed Blog) sought to extend the purge beyond Derbyshire, to include anybody who had not yet erupted into sufficiently melodramatic paroxysms of indignation, starting with David Weigel at Slate

(who she doesn't know "in real life, but in reading this piece, it seems you just might be a racist, pal"). "There are so many … racist, dehumanizing references to black people in Derbyshire's article that I have to just stop myself here before I recount the entire thing point by point with fuming rage," she shares. Unlike Peitzman, however, at least Schroeder has a point – the racial terror dialectic — "… propagating the idea that we should be afraid of black men, of black people in general, makes this world dangerous for innocent Americans." Your fear makes you scary (although apparently not with legitimate reciprocity).

As for Weigel, he gets the terror good and hard. Within hours he's back at the keyboard, apologizing for his previous insouciance, and for the fact he "never ended up saying the obvious: People, the essay was disgusting."

So what did Derbyshire actually say, where did it come from, and what does it mean to American politics (and beyond)? This sub-series will comb through the spectrum from left to right in search of suggestions, with socio-geographically manifested 'white' panic / despair as a guiding thread …

Coming next: The Liberal Ecstasy

The Dark Enlightenment (Part 4b)

MAY 3, 2012

Obnoxious observations.

Although black families and parents of boys aren't the only ones who worry about the safety of adolescents, Tillman, Brown and other parents say raising black boys is perhaps the most stressful aspect of parenting because they're dealing with a society that is fearful and hostile toward them, simply because of the color of their skin.

"Don't believe it? Walk a day in my shoes," Brown said.

Brown said that at 14, his son is at that critical age when he's always worried about his safety because of profiling.

"I don't want to scare him or have him paint people with a broad brush, but, historically, we black males have been stigmatized as the purveyors of crime and wherever we are, we're suspect," Brown said.

Black parents who don't make that fact clear, he and others said, do it at their sons' peril.

"Any African-American parent not having that conversation is being irresponsible," Brown said. "I see this whole thing as an opportunity for us to speak frankly, openly and honestly about race relations."
— Gracie Bonds Staples (Star-Telegram)

When communities resist an influx of Section 8 housing-voucher holders from the inner city, say, they are reacting overwhelmingly to behavior. Skin color is a proxy for that behavior. If inner-city blacks behaved like Asians — cramming as much knowledge into their kids as they can possibly fit into their skulls — the lingering wariness towards lower-income blacks that many Americans unquestionably harbor would disappear. Are there irredeemable racists among Americans? To be sure. They come in all colors, and we should deplore all of them. But the issue of race in the United States is more complex than polite company is usually allowed to express.

— Heather Mac Donald (City Journal)

"Let's talk about the elephant in the room. I'm black, OK" the woman said, declining to be identified because she anticipated backlash due to her race. She leaned in to look a reporter directly in the eyes. "There were black boys robbing houses in this neighborhood," she said. "That's why George was suspicious of Trayvon Martin."
— Chris Francescani (Reuters)

"In brief, dialectics can be defined as the doctrine of the unity of opposites. This embodies the essence of dialectics," Lenin notes, "but it requires explanations and development." That is to say: further discussion.

The sublimation (Aufhebung) of Marxism into Leninism is an eventuality that is best grasped crudely. By forging a revolutionary communist politics of broad application, almost entirely divorced from the mature material conditions or advanced social contradictions that had been previously anticipated, Lenin demonstrated that dialectical tension coincided, exhaustively, with its politicization (and that all reference to a 'dialectics of nature' is no more than retrospective subordination of the scientific domain to a political model). Dialectics are as real as they are made to be.

The dialectic begins with political agitation, and extends no further than its practical, antagonistic, factional and coalitional 'logic'. It is the 'superstructure' for itself, or against natural limitation, practically appropriating the political sphere in its broadest graspable extension as a platform for social domination. Everywhere that there is argument, there is an unresolved opportunity to rule.

The Cathedral incarnates these lessons. It has no need to espouse Leninism, or operational communist dialectics, because it recognizes nothing else. There is scarcely a fragment of the social 'superstructure' that has escaped dialectical reconstruction, through articulate antagonism, polarization, binary structuring, and reversal. Within the academy, the media, even the fine arts, political super-saturation has prevailed, identifying even the most minuscule elements of apprehension with conflictual 'social critique' and egalitarian teleology. Communism is the universal implication.

More dialectics is more politics, and more politics means 'progress' – or social migration to the left. The production of public agreement only leads in one direction, and within public disagreement, such impetus already exists in embryo. It is only in the absence of agreement and of publicly articulated

disagreement, which is to say, in non-dialectics, non-argument, sub-political diversity, or politically uncoordinated initiative, that the 'right-wing' refuge of 'the economy' (and civil society more widely) is to be found.

When no agreement is necessary, or coercively demanded, negative (or 'libertarian') liberty is still possible, and this non-argumentative 'other' of dialectics is easily formulated (even if, in a free society, it doesn't need to be): Do your own thing. Quite clearly, this irresponsible and negligent imperative is politically intolerable. It coincides exactly with leftist depression, retrogression, or depoliticization. Nothing cries out more urgently to be argued against.

At the opposite extreme lies the dialectical ecstasy of theatrical justice, in which the argumentative structure of legal proceedings is coupled with publicization through the media. Dialectical enthusiasm finds its definitive expression in a courtroom drama that combines lawyers, journalists, community activists, and other agents of the revolutionary superstructure in the production of a show trial. Social contradictions are staged, antagonistic cases articulated, and resolution institutionally expected. This is Hegel for prime-time television (and now for the Internet). It is the way that the Cathedral shares its message with the people.

Sometimes, in its impatient passion for progress, this message can trip over itself, because even though the agents of the Cathedral are infinitely reasonable, they are ever less sensible, often strikingly incompetent, and prone to making mistakes. This is to be expected on theological grounds. As the state becomes God, it degenerates into imbecility, on the model of the holy fool. The media-politics of the Trayvon Martin spectacle provides a pertinent example.

In the United States, as in any other large country, lots of things happen every day, exhibiting innumerable patterns of varying obscurity. For instance, on an average day, there are roughly 3,400 violent crimes, including 40 murders, 230 rapes, 1,000 robberies, and 2,100 aggravated assaults, alongside 25,000 non-violent property crimes (burglaries and thefts). Very few of these will be widely publicized, or seized upon as educational, exemplary, and representative. Even were the media not inclined towards a narrative-based selection of 'good stories', the sheer volume of incidents would compel something of the kind. Given this situation, it is all but inevitable that people will ask: Why are they telling us this?

Almost everything about the death of Trayvon Martin is controversial, except for media motivation. On that topic there

is near unanimity. The meaning or intended message of the story of the case could scarcely have been more transparent: White racist paranoia makes America dangerous for black people. It would thus rehearse the dialectic of racial terror (your fear is scary), designed – as always — to convert America's reciprocal social nightmare into a unilateral morality play, allocating legitimate dread exclusively to one side of the country's principal racial divide. It seemed perfect. A malignantly deluded white vigilante guns down an innocent black child, justifying black fear ('the talk') whilst exposing white panic as a murderous psychosis. This is a story of such archetypal progressive meaning that it cannot be told too many times. In fact, it was just too good to be true.

It soon became evident, however, that media selection – even when reinforced by the celebrity / 'community activist' rage-machine – hadn't sufficed to keep the story on script, and both of the main actors were drifting from their assigned roles. If progressively-endorsed stereotypes were to be even remotely preserved, vigorous editing would be required. This was especially necessary because certain evil, racist, bigoted readers of the Miami Herald were beginning to forge a narrative-wrecking mental connection between 'Trayvon Martin' and 'burglary tool'.

As for the killer, George Zimmerman, the name said it all. He was clearly going to be a hulking, pasty-faced, storm-trooper look-alike, hopefully some kind of Christian gun-nut, and maybe – if they really hit pay-dirt – a militia movement type with a history of homophobia and anti-abortion activism. He started off 'white' – for no obvious reason beyond media incompetence and narrative programming – then found himself transformed into a 'white Hispanic' (a category that seems to have been rapidly innovated on the spot), before gradually shifted through a series of ever more reality-compliant ethnic complications, culminating in the discovery of his Afro-Peruvian great grandfather.

In the heart of the Cathedral it was well into head-scratching time. Here was the great Amerikkkan defendant being prepped for his show trial, the President had pitched in emotionally on behalf of the sacred victim, and the coordinated ground game had been advanced to the simmering brink of race riots, when the message began falling apart, to such an extent that it now threatened to decay into an annoyingly irrelevant case of black-on-black violence. It was not only that George Zimmerman had black ancestry – making him simply 'black' by the left's own social constructivist standards – he had also grown up amicably among black people, with two African-American girls as "part of the household for years," had entered into joint business venture

with a black partner, he was a registered Democrat, and even some kind of 'community organizer' …

So why did Martin die? Was it for carrying iced tea and a bag of Skittles while black (the media and community activist approved, 'son Obama might have had' version), for scoping out burglary targets (the Kluxer racial profiling version), or for breaking Zimmerman's nose, knocking him over, sitting on top of him, and smashing his head repeatedly against the sidewalk (to be decided in court)? Was he a martyr to racial injustice, a low-level social predator, or a human symptom of American urban crisis? The only thing that was really clear when legal proceedings began, beyond the squalid sadness of the episode, was that it was not resolving anything.

For a sense of just how disconcertingly the approved lesson had disintegrated by the time Zimmerman was charged with second degree murder, it is only necessary to read this post by HBD-blogger oneSTDV, describing the dialectical derangements of the race-warrior right:

Despite the disturbing nature of the "charges" against Zimmerman, many in the alt-right refuse to grant Zimmerman any sympathy or to even view this as a seminal moment in modern leftism's anarcho-tyrannical reign. According to these

individuals, the Spanish-speaking, registered Democrat mestizo got what was coming to him — the ire of the black mob and the elite left indirectly buttressed by Zimmerman himself. Due to his voting record, multicultural background, and mentoring of minority youth, they see Zimmerman as emblematic of the left's assault on white America, a sort of ground soldier in the campaign against American whiteness. [Bolding in original]

The pop PC police were ready to move on. With the great show trial collapsing into narrative disorder, it was time to refocus on the Message, facts be damned (and double damned). 'Jezebel' best exemplifies the hectoring, vaguely hysterical tone:

You know how you can tell that black people are still oppressed? Because black people are still oppressed. If you claim that you are not a racist person (or, at least, that you're committed to working your ass off not to be one — which is really the best that any of us can promise), then you must believe that people are fundamentally born equal. So if that's true, then in a vacuum, factors like skin color should have no effect on anyone's success. Right? And therefore, if you really believe that all people are created equal, then when you see that drastic racial inequalities exist in the real world, the only thing that you could possibly conclude is that some external force is holding certain people back. Like…racism. Right? So congratulations! You

believe in racism! Unless you don't actually think that people are born equal. And if you don't believe that people are born equal, then you're a f*****g racist.

Does anyone "really believe that people are born equal," in the way it is understood here? Believe, that is, not only that a formal expectation of equal treatment is a prerequisite for civilized interaction, but that any revealed deviation from substantial equality of outcome is an obvious, unambiguous indication of oppression? That's "the only thing you could possibly conclude"?

At the very least, Jezebel should be congratulated for expressing the progressive faith in its purest form, entirely uncontaminated by sensitivity to evidence or uncertainty of any kind, casually contemptuous of any relevant research – whether existent or merely conceivable – and supremely confident about its own moral invincibility. If the facts are morally wrong, so much worse for the facts – that's the only position that could possibly be adopted, even if it's based upon a mixture of wishful thinking, deliberate ignorance, and insultingly childish lies.

To call the belief in substantial human equality a superstition is to insult superstition. It might be unwarranted to believe in leprechauns, but at least the person who holds to such a belief

isn't watching them not exist, for every waking hour of the day. Human inequality, in contrast, and in all of its abundant multiplicity, is constantly on display, as people exhibit their variations in gender, ethnicity, physical attractiveness, size and shape, strength, health, agility, charm, humor, wit, industriousness, and sociability, among countless other features, traits, abilities, and aspects of their personality, some immediately and conspicuously, some only slowly, over time. To absorb even the slightest fraction of all this and to conclude, in the only way possible, that it is either nothing at all, or a 'social construct' and index of oppression, is sheer Gnostic delirium: a commitment beyond all evidence to the existence of a true and good world veiled by appearances. People are not equal, they do not develop equally, their goals and achievements are not equal, and nothing can make them equal. Substantial equality has no relation to reality, except as its systematic negation. Violence on a genocidal scale is required to even approximate to a practical egalitarian program, and if anything less ambitious is attempted, people get around it (some more competently than others).

To take only the most obvious example, anybody with more than one child knows that nobody is born equal (monozygotic twins and clones perhaps excepted). In fact, everybody is born different, in innumerable ways. Even when – as is normally the case – the implications of these differences for life outcomes are

difficult to confidently predict, their existence is undeniable, or at least: sincerely undeniable. Of course sincerity, or even minimal cognitive coherence, is not remotely the issue here. Jezebel's position, whilst impeccable in its political correctness, is not only factually dubious, but rather laughably absurd, and actually – strictly speaking — insane. It dogmatizes a denial of reality so extreme that nobody could genuinely maintain, or even entertain it, let alone plausible explain or defend it. It is a tenet of faith that cannot be understood, but only asserted, or submitted to, as madness made law, or authoritarian religion.

The political commandment of this religion is transparent: Accept progressive social policy as the only possible solution to the sin problem of inequality. This commandment is a 'categorical imperative' – no possible fact could ever undermine, complicate, or revise it. If progressive social policy actually results in an exacerbation of the problem, 'fallen' reality is to blame, since the social malady is obviously worse than had been originally envisaged, and only redoubled efforts in the same direction can hope to remedy it. There can be nothing to learn in matters of faith. Eventually, systematic social collapse teaches the lesson that chronic failure and incremental deterioration could not communicate. (That's macro-scale social Darwinism for dummies, and it's the way that civilizations end.)

Due to it's exceptional correlation with substantial variation in social outcomes in modern societies, by far the most troublesome dimension of human bio-diversity is intelligence or general problem solving ability, quantified as IQ (measuring Spearman's 'g'). When 'statistical common sense' or profiling is applied to the proponents of Human Bio-Diversity, however, another significant trait is rapidly exposed: a remarkably consistent deficit of agreeableness. Indeed, it is widely accepted within the accursed 'community' itself that most of those stubborn and awkward enough to educate themselves on the topic of human biological variation are significantly 'socially retarded', with low verbal inhibition, low empathy, and low social integration, resulting in chronic maladaptation to group expectations. The typical EQs of this group can be extracted as the approximate square-root of their IQs. Mild autism is typical, sufficient to approach their fellow beings in a spirit of detached, natural-scientific curiosity, but not so advanced as to compel total cosmic disengagement. These traits, which they themselves consider – on the basis of copious technical information — to be substantially heritable, have manifest social consequences, reducing employment opportunities, incomes, and even reproductive potential. Despite all the free therapeutic advice available in the progressive environment, this obnoxiousness shows no sign of diminishing, and might even be intensifying.

As Jezebel shows so clearly, this can only possibly be a sign of structural oppression. Why can't obnoxious people get a break?

The history is damning. 'Sociables' have always had it in for the obnoxious, often declining to marry or do business with them, excluding them from group activities and political office, labeling them with slurs, ostracizing and avoiding them. 'Obnoxiousness' has been stigmatized and stereotyped in extremely negative terms, to such an extent that many of the obnoxious have sought out more sensitive labels, such as 'socially-challenged', or 'differently socially abled'. Not uncommonly, people have been verbally or even physically assaulted for no other reason than their radical obnoxiousness. Most tragically of all, due to their complete inability to get on with one another, the obnoxious have never been able to politically mobilize against the structural social oppression they face, or to enter into coalitions with their natural allies, such as cynics, debunkers, contrarians, and Tourette Syndrome sufferers. Obnoxiousness has yet to be liberated, although it's probable that the Internet will 'help' …

Consider John Derbyshire's essay in infamy The Talk: Nonblack Version, focusing initially on its relentless obnoxiousness, and attentive to the negative correlation between sociability and objective reason. As Derbyshire notes elsewhere, people are

generally incapable of differentiating themselves from group identities, or properly applying statistical generalizations about groups to individual cases, including their own. A rationally indefensible, but socially inevitable, reification of group profiles is psychologically normal – even 'human' – with the result that noisy, non-specific, statistical information is erroneously accepted as a contribution to self-understanding, even when specific information is available.

From the perspective of socially autistic, low-EQ, rational analysis, this is simply mistaken. If an individual has certain characteristics, the fact of belonging to a group that has similar or dissimilar average characteristics is of no relevance whatsoever. Direct and determinate information about the individual is not to any degree enriched by indirect and indeterminate (probabilistic) information about the groups to which the individual belongs. If an individual's test results are known, for instance, no additional insight is provided by statistical inferences about the test results that might have been expected based on group profiling. An Ashkenazi Jewish moron is no less moronic because he is an Ashkenazi Jew. Elderly Chinese nuns are unlikely to be murderers, but a murderer who happens to be an elderly Chinese nun is neither more nor less murderous than one who is not. This is all extremely obvious, to obnoxious people.

To normal people, however, it is not obvious at all. In part this is because rational intelligence is scarce and abnormal among humans, and in part because social 'intelligence' works with what everyone else is thinking, which is to say, with irrational groupish sentiment, meager information, prejudices, stereotypes, and heuristics. Since (almost) everybody else is taking short-cuts, or 'economizing' on reason, it is only rational to react defensively to generalizations that are likely to be reified or inappropriately applied — over-riding or substituting for specific perceptions. Anybody who anticipates being pre-defined through a group identity has an expanded ego-investment in that group and the way it is perceived. A generic assessment, however objectively arrived at, will immediately become personal, under (even quite remotely) normal conditions.

Obnoxious reason can stubbornly insist that anything average cannot be about you, but the message will not be generally received. Human social 'intelligence' is not built that way. Even supposedly sophisticated commentators blunder repeatedly into the most jarring exhibitions of basic statistical incomprehension without the slightest embarrassment, because embarrassment was designed for something else (and for almost exactly the opposite). The failure to understand stereotypes in their scientific, or probabilistic application, is a functional prerequisite

of sociability, since the sole alternative to idiocy in this respect is obnoxiousness.

Derbyshire's article is noteworthy because it succeeds in being definitively obnoxious, and has been recognized as such, despite the spluttering incoherence of most rejoinders. Among the things that 'the talk' and 'the counter-talk' share is a theatrical structure of pseudo-private conversation designed to be overheard. In both cases, a message that parents are compelled to deliver to their children is staged as the vehicle for a wider social lesson, aimed at those who, through action or inaction, have created a world that is intolerably hazardous to them.

This form is intrinsically manipulative, making even the 'original' talk a tempting target of parody. In the original, however, a tone of anguished sincerity is engineered through a deliberate performance of innocence (or ignorance). Listen son, I know this will be difficult to understand … (Oh why, oh why are they doing this to us?). The counter-talk, in stark contrast, melds its micro-social drama with the clinically non-sociable discourse of "methodical inquiries in the human sciences" – treating populations as fuzzy bio-geographical units with quantifiable characteristics, rather than as legal-political subjects in communication. It derides innocence, and – by implication – the criterion of sociability itself. Agreement, agreeableness, count

for nothing. The rigorously and redundantly compiled statistics say what they say, and if we cannot live with that, so much the worse for us.

Yet even to a reasonably sympathetic, or scrupulously obnoxious, reading, Derbyshire's article provides grounds for criticism. For instance, and from the beginning, it is notable that the racial reciprocal of "nonblack Americans" is 'black Americans', not "American blacks" (the term Derbyshire selects). This reversal of word order, switching nouns and adjectives, quickly settles into a pattern. Does it matter that Derbyshire requests the extension of civility to any "individual black" (rather than to 'black individuals')? It certainly makes a difference. To say that someone is 'black' is to say something about them, but to say that someone is 'a black' is to say who they are. The effect is subtly, yet distinctly, menacing, and Derbyshire is too well-trained, algebraically, to be excused from noticing it. After all, 'John Derbyshire is a white' sounds equally off, as does any analogous formulation, submerging the individual in the genus, to be retrieved as a mere instance, or example.

The more intellectually substantive aspect of this over-reach into gratuitous incivility have been examined by William Saletan and Noah Millman, who make very similar points, from the two

sides of the liberal/conservative divide. Both writers identify a fissure or methodical incongruity in Derbyshire's article, stemming from its commitment to the micro-social application of macro-social statistical generalizations. Stereotypes, however rigorously confirmed, are essentially inferior to specific knowledge in any concrete social situation, because nobody ever encounters a population.

As a liberal of problematic standing, Saletan has no choice but to recoil melodramatically from Derbyshire's "stomach-turning conclusions," but his reasons for doing so are not consumed by his gastro-emotional crisis. "But what exactly is a statistical truth?" he asks. "It's a probability estimate you might fall back on if you know nothing about [a particular individual]. It's an ignorant person's weak substitute for knowledge." Derbyshire, with his Aspergery attention to the absence of black Fields Medal winners, is "…a math nerd who substitutes statistical intelligence for social intelligence. He recommends group calculations instead of taking the trouble to learn about the person standing in front of you."

Millman emphasizes the ironic reversal that switches (obnoxious) social scientific knowledge into imperative ignorance:

The "race realists" like to say that they are the ones who are curious about the world, and the "politically correct" types are the ones who prefer to ignore ugly reality. But the advice Derbyshire gives to his children encourages them not to be too curious about the world around them, for fear of getting hurt. And, as a general rule, that's terrible advice for kids – and not the advice that Derbyshire has followed in his own life.

Millman's conclusion is also instructive:

So why am I arguing with Derb at all? Well, because he's a friend. And because even lazy, socially-irresponsible talk deserves to be refuted, not merely denounced. Is Derbyshire's piece racist? Of course it's racist. His whole point is that it is both rational and morally right for his children to treat black people significantly differently from white people, and to fear them. But "racist" is a descriptive term, not a moral one. The "race realist" crowd is strongly convinced of the accuracy of Derbyshire's major premises, and they are not going to be argued out of that conviction by the assertion such conviction is "racist" – nor, honestly, should they be. For that reason, I feel it's important to argue that Derbyshire's conclusions do not follow simply from those premises, and are, in fact, morally incorrect even if those premises are granted for the sake of argument.

[Brief intermission …]

The Dark Enlightenment (Part 4c)

MAY 17, 2012

The Cracker Factory.

In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men — yes, black men as well as white men — would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given

the Negro people a bad check, a check that has come back marked "insufficient funds."
— Martin Luther King Jr.

Conservatism … is a white people's movement, a scattering of outliers notwithstanding.

Always has been, always will be. I have attended at least a hundred conservative gatherings, conferences, cruises, and jamborees: let me tell you, there ain't too many raisins in that bun. I was in and out of the National Review offices for twelve years, and the only black person I saw there, other than when Herman Cain came calling, was Alex, the guy who runs the mail room. (Hey, Alex!)

This isn't because conservatism is hostile to blacks and mestizos. Very much the contrary, especially in the case of Conservatism Inc. They fawn over the occasional nonwhite with a puppyish deference that fairly fogs the air with embarrassment. (Q: What do you call the one black guy at a gathering of 1,000 Republicans? A: "Mr. Chairman.")

It's just that conservative ideals like self-sufficiency and minimal dependence on government have no appeal to underperforming minorities — groups who, in the statistical generality, are short

of the attributes that make for group success in a modern commercial nation.

Of what use would it be to them to embrace such ideals? They would end up even more decisively pooled at the bottom of society than they are currently.

A much better strategy for them is to ally with as many disaffected white and Asian subgroups as they can (homosexuals, feminists, dead-end labor unions), attain electoral majorities, and institute big redistributionist governments to give them make-work jobs and transfer wealth to them from successful groups.

Which is what, very rationally and sensibly, they do.
— John Derbyshire

Neo-secessionists are all around us… and free speech gives them a cozy blanket of protection. Rick Perry insinuating Texas could secede rather than adhere to the federal healthcare law, Todd Palin belonging to a political association advocating Alaskan secession, and Sharron Angle talking about 'second amendment remedies' to handle disputes with federal authorities are all examples of dangerous secessionist rhetoric permeating through modern discourse. The media focuses our attention at

Civil War reenactors and pick-up trucks with Confederate flags flying on them. But public figures are influenced as well, by academics who struggle to perpetuate a most dangerous brand of revisionism.
— Practically Historical

African-Americans are the conscience of our country.
— commenter 'surfed' at Walter Russell Mead's blog (edited for spelling)

America's racial 'original sin' was foundational, dating back before the birth of the United States to the clearing of aboriginal peoples by European settlers, and – still more saliently – to the institution of chattel slavery. This is the Old Testament history of American black-white relations, set down in a providential narrative of escape from bondage, in which factual documentation and moral exhortation are indissolubly fused. The combination of prolonged and intense social abuse in a pattern set by the Torah, recapitulating the primordial moral-political myth of the Western tradition, has installed the story of slavery and emancipation as the unsurpassable frame of the American historical experience: let my people go.

'Practically Historical' (cited above), quotes Lincoln on the Civil War:

Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

The New Testament of race in America was written in the 1960s, revising and specifying the template. The combination of the Civil Rights Movement, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, and the Republican Southern Strategy (appealing to disaffected whites in the states of the old Confederacy) forged a partisan identification between Blacks and the Democratic Party that amounted to a liberal-progressive rebirth, setting the terms for partisan racial polarization that have endured – and even strengthened – over subsequent decades. For a progressive movement compromised by a history of systematic eugenicist racism, and a Democratic Party traditionally aligned with white southern obduracy and the Ku Klux Klan, the civil rights era presented an opportunity for atonement, ritual purification, and redemption.

Reciprocally, for American conservatism (and its increasingly directionless Republican Party vehicle), this progression spelt

protracted death, for reasons that continue to elude it. The Idea of America was now inextricable from a vehement renunciation of the past, and even of the present, insofar as the past still shaped it. Only an 'ever more perfect union' could conform to it. At the most superficial level, the broad partisan implications of the new order were unmistakable in a country that was becoming ever more democratic, and ever less republican, with effective sovereignty nationally concentrated in the executive, and the moral urgency of activist government installed as a principle of faith. For what had already become the 'Old Right' there was no way out, or back, because the path backwards crossed the event horizon of the civil rights movement, into tracts of political impossibility whose ultimate meaning was slavery.

The left thrives on dialectics, the right perishes through them. Insofar as there is a pure logic of politics, it is that. One immediate consequence (repeatedly emphasized by Mencius Moldbug) is that progressivism has no enemies to the left. It recognizes only idealists, whose time has not yet come. Factional conflicts on the left are politically dynamic, celebrated for their motive potential. Conservatism, in contrast, is caught between a rock and a hard place: bludgeoned from the left by the juggernaut of post-constitutional statism, and agitated from 'the right' by inchoate tendencies which are both unassimilable (to

the mainstream) and often mutually incompatible, ranging from extreme (Austro-libertarian) varieties of laissez-faire capitalist advocacy to strains of obstinate, theologically-grounded social traditionalism, ultra-nationalism, or white identity politics.

'The right' has no unity, actual or prospective, and thus has no definition symmetrical to that of the left. It is for this reason that political dialectics (a tautology) ratchets only in one direction, predictably, towards state expansion and an increasingly coercive substantial-egalitarian ideal. The right moves to the center, and the center moves to the left.

Regardless of mainstream conservative fantasies, liberal-progressive mastery of American providence has become uncontestable, dominated by a racial dialectic that absorbs unlimited contradiction, whilst positioning the Afro-American underclass as the incarnate critique of the existing social order, the criterion of emancipation, and the sole path to collective salvation. No alternative structure of historical intelligibility is politically tolerable, or even – strictly speaking – imaginable, since resistance to the narrative is un-American, anti-social, and (of course) racist, serving only to confirm the existence of systematic racial oppression through the symbolic violence manifested in its negation. To argue against it is already to prove it correct, by concretely demonstrating the same benighted

forces of social retardation that are being verbally denied. By resisting the demand for orchestrated social re-education, knuckle-dragging 'bitter clingers' only show how much there still is to do.

At its most abstract and all-encompassing, the liberal-progressive racial dialectic abolishes its outside, along with any possibility of principled consistency. It asserts — at one and the same time — that race does not exist, and that its socially-constructed pseudo-existence is an instrument of inter-racial violence. Racial recognition is both mandatory, and forbidden. Racial identities are meticulously catalogued for purposes of social remedy, hate crime detection, and disparate impact studies, targeting groups for 'positive discrimination', 'affirmative action', or 'diversity promotion' (to list these terms in their rough order of historical substitution), even as they are denounced as meaningless (by the United Nations, no less), and dismissed as malicious stereotypes, corresponding to nothing real. Extreme racial sensitivity and absolute racial desensitization are demanded simultaneously. Race is everything and nothing. There is no way out.

Conservatism is dialectically incompetent by definition, and so abjectly clueless that it imagines itself being able to exploit these contradictions, or – in its deluded formulation – liberal cognitive

dissonance. The conservatives who triumphantly point out such inconsistencies seem never to have skimmed the output of a contemporary humanities program, in which thick rafts of internally conflicted victimage are lovingly woven out of incompatible grievances, in order to exult in the radical progressive promise of their discordant lamentations. Inconsistency is fuel for the Cathedral, demanding activist argumentation, and ever heightened realizations of unity. Integrative public debate always moves things to the left — that might not seem an especially difficult point to grasp, but to understand it is to expose the fundamental futility of mainstream conservatism, and that is in almost nobody's interest, so it will not be understood.

Conservatism is incapable of working dialectics, or simultaneous contradiction, but that does not prevent it from serving progress (on the contrary). Rather than celebrating the power of inconsistency, it stumbles through contradictions, decompressed, in succession, in the manner of a fossil exhibition, and a foil. After "standing athwart history, yelling 'Stop!'" during the Civil Rights Era, and thus banishing itself eternally to racial damnation, the conservative (and Republican) mainstream reversed course, seizing upon Martin Luther King Jr. as an integral part of its canon, and seeking to harmonize itself with "a dream deeply rooted in the American dream."

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

Captivated by King's appeal to constitutional and biblical traditionalism, by his rejection of political violence, and by his uninhibited paeans to freedom, American conservatism gradually came to identify with his dream of racial reconciliation and race blindness, and to accept it as the true, providential meaning of its own most sacred documents. At least, this became the mainstream, public, conservative orthodoxy, even

though it was consolidated far too late to neutralize suspicions of insincerity, failed almost entirely to convince the black demographic itself, and would remain open to escalating derision from the left for its empty formalism.

So compelling was King's restatement of the American Creed that, retrospectively, its triumph over the political mainstream seems simply inevitable. The further American conservatism departed from the Masonic rationalism of the founders, in the direction of biblical religiosity, the more indistinguishable its faith became from a Black American experience, mythically articulated through Exodus, in which the basic framework of history was an escape from bondage, borne towards a future in which "all of God's children — black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics — will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!'"

The genius of King's message lay in its extraordinary power of integration. The flight of the Hebrews from Egypt, the American War of Independence, the abolition of chattel slavery in the wake of the American Civil War, and the aspirations of the civil rights era were mythically compressed into a single archetypal episode, perfectly consonant with the American Creed, and driven forwards not only by irresistible moral force,

but even by divine decree. The measure of this integrative genius, however, is the complexity it masters. A century after the "joyous daybreak" of emancipation from slavery, King declares, "the Negro still is not free."

One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land.

The story of Exodus is exit, the War of Independence is exit, and the emancipation from slavery is exit, especially when this is exemplified by the Underground Railroad and the model of self-liberation, escape, or flight. To be 'manacled' by segregation, 'chained' by discrimination, trapped on a 'lonely island of poverty', or 'exiled' in one's 'own land', in contrast, has no relation to exit whatsoever, beyond that which spell-binding metaphor can achieve. There is no exit into social integration and acceptance, equitably distributed prosperity, public participation, or assimilation, but only an aspiration, or a dream, hostage to fact and fortune. As the left and the reactionary right were equally quick to notice, insofar as this dream ventures

significantly beyond a right to formal equality and into the realm of substantial political remedy, it is one that the right has no right to.

In the immediate wake of the John Derbyshire affair, Jessica Valenti at The Nation blog makes the point clearly:

… this isn't just about who has written what — it's about the intensely racist policies that are par for the conservative course. Some people would like to believe that racism is just the explicit, said-out-loud discrimination and hatred that is easily identifiable. It's not — it's also pushing xenophobic policies and supporting systemic inequality. After all, what's more impactful — a singular racist like Derbyshire or Arizona's immigration law? A column or voter suppression? Getting rid of one racist from one publication doesn't change the fact that the conservative agenda is one that disproportionately punishes and discriminates against people of color. So, I'm sorry, folks — you don't get to support structural inequality and then give yourself a pat on the back for not being overtly racist.

The 'conservative agenda' cannot ever be dreamy (hopeful and inconsistent) enough to escape accusations of racism – that's intrinsic to the way the racial dialectic works. Policies broadly compatible with capitalistic development, oriented to the

rewarding of low time-preference, and thus punishing impulsivity, will reliably have a disparate impact upon the least economically functional social groups. Of course, the dialectic demands that the racial aspect of this disparate impact can and must be strongly emphasized (for the purpose of condemning incentives to human capital formation as racist), and at the same time forcefully denied (in order to denounce exactly the same observation as racist stereotyping). Anyone who expects conservatives to navigate this double-bind with political agility and grace must somehow have missed the late 20th century. For instance, the doomed loser idiots conservatives at the Washington Examiner, noticing with alarm that:

House Democrats received training this week on how to address the issue of race to defend government programs … The prepared content of a Tuesday presentation to the House Democratic Caucus and staff indicates that Democrats will seek to portray apparently neutral free-market rhetoric as being charged with racial bias, conscious or unconscious.

There are no alternative versions of an ever more perfect union, because union is the alternative to alternatives. Searching for where the alternatives might once have been found, where liberty still meant exit, and where dialectics were dissolved in space, leads into a clown-house of horrors, fabricated as the

shadow, or significant other, of the Cathedral. Since the right never had a unity of its own, it was given one. Call it the Cracker Factory.

When James C. Bennett, in The Anglosphere Challenge, sought to identify the principal cultural characteristics of the English-speaking world, the resulting list was generally familiar. It included, besides the language itself, common law traditions, individualism, comparatively high-levels of economic and technological openness, and distinctively emphatic reservations about centralized political power. Perhaps the most striking feature, however, was a marked cultural tendency to settle disagreements in space, rather than time, opting for territorial schism, separatism, independence, and flight, in place of revolutionary transformation within an integrated territory. When Anglophones disagree, they have often sought to dissociate in space. Instead of an integral resolution (regime change), they pursue a plural irresolution (through regime division), proliferating polities, localizing power, and diversifying systems of government. Even in its present, highly attenuated form, this anti-dialectical, de-synthesizing predisposition to social disaggregation finds expression in a stubborn, sussurous hostility to globalist political projects, and in a vestigial attraction to federalism (in its fissional sense).

Splitting, or fleeing, is all exit, and (non-recuperable) anti-dialectics. It is the basic well-spring of liberty within the Anglophone tradition. If the function of a Cracker Factory is to block off all the exits, there's only one place to build it – right here.

Like Hell, or Auschwitz, the Cracker Factory has a simple slogan inscribed upon its gate: Escape is racist. That is why the expression 'white flight' – which says exactly the same thing – has never been denounced for its political incorrectness, despite the fact that it draws upon an ethnic statistical generalization of the kind that would, in any other case, provoke paroxysms of outrage. 'White flight' is no more 'white' than low time-preference is, but this broad-brush insensitivity is deemed acceptable, because it structurally supports the Cracker Factory, and the indispensable confusion of ancient (or negative) liberty with original (racial) sin.

You absolutely, definitely, mustn't go there … so, of course, we will … [next]

The Dark Enlightenment (Part 4d)

JUNE 15, 2012

Odd Marriages.

The origins of the word 'cracker' as a term of ethnic derision are distant and obscure. It seems to have already circulated, as a slur targeting poor southern whites of predominantly Celtic ancestry, in the mid-18th century, derived perhaps from 'corn-cracker' or the Scots-Irish 'crack' (banter). The rich semantic complexion of the term, inextricable from the identification of elaborate racial, cultural, and class characteristics, is comparable to that of its unmentionable dusky cousin – "the 'N-'word" – and draws from the same well of generally recognized but forbidden truths. In particular, and emphatically, it testifies to the illicit truism that people are more excited and animated by their differences than by their commonalities, 'clinging bitterly' – or at least tenaciously

– to their non-uniformity, and obstinately resisting the universal categories of enlightened population management. Crackers are grit in the clockwork of progress.

The most delectable features of the slur, however, are entirely fortuitous (or Qabbalistic). 'Crackers' break codes, safes, organic chemicals – sealed or bonded systems of all kinds – with eventual geopolitical implication. They anticipate a crack-up, schism or secession, confirming their association with the anathematized disintegrative undercurrent of Anglophone history. No surprise, then – despite the linguistic jumps and glitching – that the figure of the recalcitrant cracker evokes a still-unpacified South, insubordinate to the manifest destiny of Union. This returns it, by short-circuit, to the most problematic depths of its meaning.

Contradictions demand resolution, but cracks can continue to widen, deepen, and spread. According to the cracker ethos, when things can fall apart – it's OK. There's no need to reach agreement, when it's possible to split. This cussedness, pursued to its limit, tends to a hill-billy stereotype set in a shack or rusting trailer at the end of an Appalachian mountain path, where all economic transactions are conducted in cash (or moonshine), interactions with government agents are conducted across the barrel of a loaded shotgun, and timeless anti-political

wisdom is summed in the don't-tread-on-me reflex: "Get off my porch." Naturally, this disdain for integrative debate (dialectics) is coded within the mainstream of Anglocentric global history – which is to say, Yankee evangelical Puritanism – as a deficiency not only of cultural sophistication, but also of basic intelligence, and even the most scrupulous adherent of social constructivist righteousness immediately reverts to hard-hereditarian psychometrics when confronted by cracker obstreperousness. To those for whom a broad trend of socio-political progress seems like a simple, incontestable fact, the refusal to recognize anything of the kind is perceived as clear evidence of retardation.

Since stereotypes generally have high statistical truth-value, it's more than possible that crackers are clustered heavily on the left of the white IQ bell-curve, concentrated there by generations of dysgenic pressure. If, as Charles Murray argues, the efficiency of meritocratic selection within American society has steadily risen and conspired with assortative mating to transform class differences into genetic castes, it would be passing strange if the cracker stratum were to be characterized by conspicuous cognitive elevation. Yet some awkwardly intriguing questions intervene at this point, as long as one diligently pursues the stereotype. Assortative mating? How can that work, when crackers marry their cousins? Oh yes, there's that. Drawing on

population groups beyond the north-western Hajnal Line, traditional cracker kinship patterns are notably atypical of the exogamous Anglo (WASP) norm.

The tireless 'hbdchick' is the crucial resource on this topic. Over the course of a truly monumental series of blog posts, she employs Hamiltonian conceptual tools to investigate the borderland where nature and culture intersect, comprising kinship structures, the differentiations they require in the calculus of inclusive fitness, and the distinctive ethnic profiles in the evolutionary psychology of altruism that result. In particular, she directs attention to the abnormality of (North-West) European history, where obligatory exogamy – through rigorous proscription of cousin marriage – has prevailed for 1,600 years. This distinctive orientation towards outbreeding, she suggests, plausibly accounts for a variety of bio-cultural peculiarities, the most historically significant of which is a unique pre-eminence of reciprocal (over familial) altruism, as indicated by emphatic individualism, nuclear families, an affinity with 'corporate' (kinship-free) institutions, highly-developed contractual relationships among strangers, relatively low levels of nepotism / corruption, and robust forms of social cohesion independent of tribal bonds.

Inbreeding, in contrast, creates a selective environment favoring tribal collectivism, extended systems of family loyalty and honor, distrust of non-relatives and impersonal institutions, and – in general – those 'clannish' traits which mesh uncomfortably with the leading values of (Eurocentric) modernity, and are thus denounced for their primitive 'xenophobia' and 'corruption'. Clannish values, of course, are bred in clans, such as those populating Britain's Celtic fringe and borderlands, where cousin marriage persisted, along with its associated socio-economic and cultural forms, especially herding (rather than farming), and a disposition towards extreme, vendetta-style violence.

This analysis introduces the central paradox of 'white identity', since the specifically European ethnic traits that have structured the moral order of modernity, slanting it away from tribalism and towards reciprocal altruism, are inseparable from a unique heritage of outbreeding that is intrinsically corrosive of ethnocentric solidarity. In other words: it is almost exactly weak ethnic groupishness that makes a group ethnically modernistic, competent at 'corporate' (non-familial) institution building, and thus objectively privileged / advantaged within the dynamic of modernity.

This paradox is most fully expressed in the radical forms of European ethnocentric revivalism exemplified by paleo- and

neo-Nazism, confounding its proponents and antagonists alike. When exceptionally advanced 'race-treachery' is your quintessential racial feature, the opportunity for viable ethno-supremacist politics disappears into a logical abyss – even if occasions for large-scale trouble-making no doubt remain. Admittedly, a Nazi, by definition, is willing (and eager) to sacrifice modernity upon the altar of racial purity, but this is either not to understand, or to tragically affirm, the inevitable consequence – which is to be out-modernized (and thus defeated). Identity politics is for losers, inherently and unalterably, due to an essentially parasitical character that only works from the left. Because inbreeding systematically contra-indicates for modern power, racial Übermenschen make no real sense.

In any case, however endlessly fascinating Nazis may be, they are not any kind of reliable key to the history or direction of cracker culture, beyond setting a logical limit to the programmatic construction and usage of white identity politics. Tattooing swastikas on their foreheads does nothing to change that. (Hatfields vs McCoys is more Pushtun than Teuton.)

The conjunction taking place in the Cracker Factory is quite different, and far more perplexing, entangling the urbane, cosmopolitan advocates of hyper-contractarian marketization

with romantic traditionalists, ethno-particularists, and nostalgics of the 'Lost Cause'. It is first necessary to understand this entanglement in its full, mind-melting weirdness, before exploring its lessons. For that, some semi-random stripped-down data-points might be helpful:

* The Mises Institute was founded in Auburn, Alabama.

* Ron Paul newsletters from the 1980s contain remarks of a decidedly Derbyshirean hue.

* Derbyshire hearts Ron Paul.

* Murray Rothbard has written in defense of HBD.

* lewrockwell.com contributors include Thomas J. DiLorenzo and Thomas Woods

* Tom Palmer doesn't heart Lew Rockwell or Hans-Hermann Hoppe because "Together They Have Opened the Gates of Hell and Welcomed the Most Extreme Right-Wing Racists, Nationalists, and Assorted Cranks"

* Libertarians / constitutionalists account for 20% of the SPLC 'Radical Right' watch list (Chuck Baldwin, Michael Boldin, Tom DeWeese, Alex Jones, Cliff Kincaid, and Elmer Stewart Rhodes)

… perhaps that's enough to be going on with (although there's plenty more within easy reach). These points have been selected, questionably, crudely, and prejudicially, to lend impressionistic support to a single basic thesis: fundamental socio-historical forces are crackerizing libertarianism.

If the tentative research conclusions drawn by hbdchick are accepted as a frame, the oddity of this marriage between libertarian and neo-confederate themes is immediately apparent. When positioned on a bio-cultural axis, defined by degrees of outbreeding, the absence of overlap – or even proximity – is dramatically exposed. One pole is occupied by a radically individualistic doctrine, focused near-exclusively upon mutable networks of voluntary interchange of an economic type (and notoriously insensitive to the very existence of non-negotiable social bonds). Close to the other pole lies a rich culture of local attachment, extended family, honor, contempt for commercial values, and distrust of strangers. The distilled rationality of fluid capitalism is juxtaposed to traditional hierarchy and non-alienable value. The absolute prioritization of exit is jumbled amongst folkways from which no exit is even imaginable.

Stapling the two together, however, is a simple, ever more irresistible conclusion: liberty has no future in the Anglophone world outside the prospect of secession. The coming crack-up is the only way out.

The Dark Enlightenment (Part 4e)

JULY 3, 2012

Cross-coded history.

Democracy is the opposite of freedom, almost inherent to the democratic process is that it tends towards less liberty instead of more, and democracy is not something to be fixed. Democracy is inherently broken, just like socialism. The only way to fix it is to break it up. — Frank Karsten

Historian (mainly of science) Doug Fosnow called for the USA's "red" counties to secede from the "blue" ones, forming a new federation. This was greeted with much skepticism by the audience, who noted that the "red" federation would get practically no seacoast. Did Doug really think such a secession was likely to happen? No, he admitted cheerfully, but anything

would be better than the race war he does think is likely to happen, and it is intellectuals' duty to come up with less horrific possibilities.– John Derbyshire

Thus, rather than by means of a top-down reform, under the current conditions, one's strategy must be one of a bottom-up revolution. At first, the realization of this insight would seem to make the task of a liberal-libertarian social revolution impossible, for does this not imply that one would have to persuade a majority of the public to vote for the abolition of democracy and an end to all taxes and legislation? And is this not sheer fantasy, given that the masses are always dull and indolent, and even more so given that democracy, as explained above, promotes moral and intellectual degeneration? How in the world can anyone expect that a majority of an increasingly degenerate people accustomed to the "right" to vote should ever voluntarily renounce the opportunity of looting other people's property? Put this way, one must admit that the prospect of a social revolution must indeed be regarded as virtually nil. Rather, it is only on second thought, upon regarding secession as an integral part of any bottom-up strategy, that the task of a liberal-libertarian revolution appears less than impossible, even if it still remains a daunting one. – Hans-Hermann Hoppe

Conceived generically, modernity is a social condition defined by an integral trend, summarized as sustained economic growth rates that exceed population increases, and thus mark an escape from normal history, caged within the Malthusian trap. When, in the interest of dispassionate appraisal, analysis is restricted to the terms of this basic quantitative pattern, it supports sub-division into the (growth) positive and negative components of the trend: techno-industrial (scientific and commercial) contributions to accelerating development on the one hand, and socio-political counter-tendencies towards the capture of economic product by democratically empowered rent-seeking special interests on the other (demosclerosis). What classical liberalism gives (industrial revolution) mature liberalism takes away (via the cancerous entitlement state). In abstract geometry, it describes an S-curve of self-limiting runaway. As a drama of liberation, it is a broken promise.

Conceived particularly, as a singularity, or real thing, modernity has ethno-geographical characteristics that complicate and qualify its mathematical purity. It came from somewhere, imposed itself more widely, and brought the world's various peoples into an extraordinary range of novel relations. These relations were characteristically 'modern' if they involved an overflowing of previous Malthusian limits, enabling capital accumulation, and initiating new demographic trends, but they

conjoined concrete groups rather than abstract economic functions. At least in appearance, therefore, modernity was something done by people of a certain kind with, and not uncommonly to (or even against), other people, who were conspicuously unlike them. By the time it was faltering on the fading slope of the S-curve, in the early 20th century, resistance to its generic features ('capitalistic alienation') had become almost entirely indistinguishable from opposition to its particularity ('European imperialism' and 'white supremacy'). As an inevitable consequence, the modernistic self-consciousness of the system's ethno-geographical core slid towards racial panic, in a process that was only arrested by the rise and immolation of the Third Reich.

Given modernity's inherent trend to degeneration or self-cancellation, three broad prospects open. These are not strictly exclusive, and are therefore not true alternatives, but for schematic purposes it is helpful to present them as such.

(1) Modernity 2.0. Global modernization is re-invigorated from a new ethno-geographical core, liberated from the degenerate structures of its Eurocentric predecessor, but no doubt confronting long range trends of an equally mortuary character. This is by far the most encouraging and plausible scenario (from a pro-modernist perspective), and if China remains even

approximately on its current track it will be assuredly realized. (India, sadly, seems to be too far gone in its native version of demosclerosis to seriously compete.)

(2) Postmodernity. Amounting essentially to a new dark age, in which Malthusian limits brutally re-impose themselves, this scenario assumes that Modernity 1.0 has so radically globalized its own morbidity that the entire future of the world collapses around it. If the Cathedral 'wins' this is what we have coming.

(3) Western Renaissance. To be reborn it is first necessary to die, so the harder the 'hard reboot' the better. Comprehensive crisis and disintegration offers the best odds (most realistically as a sub-theme of option #1).

Because competition is good, a pinch of Western Renaissance would spice things up, even if – as is overwhelmingly probable — Modernity 2.0 is the world's principal highway to the future. That depends upon the West stopping and reversing pretty much everything it has been doing for over a century, excepting only scientific, technological, and business innovation. It is advisable to maintain rhetorical discipline within a strictly hypothetical mode, because the possibility of any of these things is deeply colored by incredibility:

(1) Replacement of representational democracy by constitutional republicanism (or still more extreme anti-political governmental mechanisms).

(2) Massive downsizing of government and its rigorous confinement to core functions (at most).

(3) Restoration of hard money (precious metal coins and bullion deposit notes) and abolition of central banking.

(4) Dismantling of state monetary and fiscal discretion, thus abolishing practical macroeconomics and liberating the autonomous (or 'catallactic') economy. (This point is redundant, since it follows rigorously from 2 & 3 above, but it's the real prize, so worth emphasizing.)

There's more – which is to say, less politics – but it's already absolutely clear that none of this is going to happen short of an existential civilizational cataclysm. Asking politicians to limit their own powers is a non-starter, but nothing less heads even remotely in the right direction. This, however, isn't even the widest or deepest problem.

Democracy might begin as a defensible procedural mechanism for limiting government power, but it quickly and inexorably

develops into something quite different: a culture of systematic thievery. As soon as politicians have learnt to buy political support from the 'public purse', and conditioned electorates to embrace looting and bribery, the democratic process reduces itself to the formation of (Mancur Olson's) 'distributional coalitions' – electoral majorities mortared together by common interest in a collectively advantageous pattern of theft. Worse still, since people are, on average, not very bright, the scale of depredation available to the political establishment far exceeds even the demented sacking that is open to public scrutiny. Looting the future, through currency debauchment, debt accumulation, growth destruction, and techno-industrial retardation is especially easy to conceal, and thus reliably popular. Democracy is essentially tragic because it provides the populace with a weapon to destroy itself, one that is always eagerly seized, and used. Nobody ever says 'no' to free stuff. Scarcely anybody even sees that there is no free stuff. Utter cultural ruination is the necessary conclusion.

Within the final phase of Modernity 1.0, American history becomes the master narrative of the world. It is there that the great Abrahamic cultural conveyor culminates in the secularized neo-puritanism of the Cathedral, as it establishes the New Jerusalem in Washington DC. The apparatus of Messianic-revolutionary purpose is consolidated in the evangelical state,

which is authorized by any means necessary to install a new world order of universal fraternity, in the name of equality, human rights, social justice, and – above all – democracy. The absolute moral confidence of the Cathedral underwrites the enthusiastic pursuit of unrestrained centralized power, optimally unlimited in its intensive penetration and its extensive scope.

With an irony altogether hidden from the witch-burners' spawn themselves, the ascent of this squinting cohort of grim moral fanatics to previously unscaled heights of global power coincides with the descent of mass-democracy to previously unimagined depths of gluttonous corruption. Every five years America steals itself from itself again, and fences itself back in exchange for political support. This democracy thing is easy – you just vote for the guy who promises you the most stuff. An idiot could do it. Actually, it likes idiots, treats them with apparent kindness, and does everything it can to manufacture more of them.

Democracy's relentless trend to degeneration presents an implicit case for reaction. Since every major threshold of socio-political 'progress' has ratcheted Western civilization towards comprehensive ruin, a retracing of its steps suggests a reversion from the society of pillage to an older order of self-reliance, honest industry and exchange, pre-propagandistic learning, and civic self-organization. The attractions of this reactionary vision

are evidenced by the vogue for 18th century attire, symbols, and constitutional documents among the substantial (Tea Party) minority who clearly see the disastrous course of American political history.

Has the 'race' alarm sounded in your head yet? It would be amazing if it hadn't. Stagger back in imagination before 2008, and the fraught whisper of conscience is already questioning your prejudices against Kenyan revolutionaries and black Marxist professors. Remain in reverse until the Great Society / Civil Rights era and the warnings reach hysterical pitch. It's perfectly obvious by this point that American political history has progressed along twin, interlocking tracks, corresponding to the capacity and the legitimation of the state. To cast doubt upon its scale and scope is to simultaneously dispute the sanctity of its purpose, and the moral-spiritual necessity that it command whatever resources, and impose whatever legal restraints, may be required to effectively fulfill it. More specifically, to recoil from the magnitude of Leviathan is to demonstrate insensitivity to the immensity – indeed, near infinity – of inherited racial guilt, and the sole surviving categorical imperative of senescent modernity – government needs to do more. The possibility, indeed near certainty, that the pathological consequences of chronic government activism have long ago supplanted the problems they originally targeted, is a contention so utterly

maladapted to the epoch of democratic religion that its practical insignificance is assured.

Even on the left, it would be extraordinary to find many who genuinely believe, after sustained reflection, that the primary driver of government expansion and centralization has been the burning desire to do good (not that intentions matter). Yet, as the twin tracks cross, such is the electric jolt of moral drama, leaping the gap from racial Golgotha to intrusive Leviathan, that skepticism is suspended, and the great progressive myth installed. The alternative to more government, doing ever more, was to stand there, negligently, whilst they lynched another Negro. This proposition contains the entire essential content of American progressive education.

The twin historical tracks of state capability and purpose can be conceived as a translation protocol, enabling any recommended restraint upon government power to be 'decoded' as malign obstruction of racial justice. This system of substitutions functions so smoothly that it provides an entire vocabulary of (bipartisan) 'code-words' or 'dog-whistles' – 'welfare', 'freedom of association', 'states rights' – ensuring that any intelligible utterance on the Principal (left-right) Political Dimension occupies a double registry, semi-saturated by racial evocations. Reactionary regression smells of strange fruit.

… and that is before backing out of the calamitous 20th century. It was not the Civil Rights Era, but the 'American Civil War' (in the terms of the victors) or 'War between the States' (in those of the vanquished) that first indissolubly cross-coded the practical question of Leviathan with (black/white) racial dialectics, laying down the central junction yard of subsequent political antagonism and rhetoric. The indispensable primary step in comprehending this fatality snakes along an awkward diagonal between mainstream statist and revisionist accounts, because the conflagration that consumed the American nation in the early 1860s was wholly but non-exclusively about emancipation from slavery and about states rights, with neither 'cause' reducible to the other, or sufficient to suppress the war's enduring ambiguities. Whilst there are any number of 'liberals' happy to celebrate the consolidation of centralized government power in the triumphant Union, and, symmetrically, a (far smaller) number of neo-confederate apologists for the institution of chattel slavery in the southern states, neither of these unconflicted stances capture the dynamic cultural legacy of a war across the codes.

The war is a knot. By practically dissociating liberty into emancipation and independence, then hurling each against the other in a half-decade of carnage, blue against gray, it was settled

that freedom would be broken on the battlefield, whatever the outcome of the conflict. Union victory determined that the emancipatory sense of liberty would prevail, not only in America, but throughout the world, and the eventual reign of the Cathedral was assured. Nevertheless, the crushing of American's second war of secession made a mockery of the first. If the institution of slavery de-legitimated a war of independence, what survived of 1776? The moral coherence of the Union cause required that the founders were reconceived as politically illegitimate white patriarchal slave-owners, and American history combusted in progressive education and the culture wars.

If independence is the ideology of slave-holders, emancipation requires the programmatic destruction of independence. Within a cross-coded history, the realization of freedom is indistinguishable from its abolition.

The Dark Enlightenment (Part 4f(inal))

JULY 20, 2012

Approaching the Bionic Horizon.

It's time to bring this long digression to a conclusion, by reaching out impatiently towards the end. The basic theme has been mind control, or thought-suppression, as demonstrated by the Media-Academic complex that dominates contemporary Western societies, and which Mencius Moldbug names the Cathedral. When things are squashed they rarely disappear. Instead, they are displaced, fleeing into sheltering shadows, and sometimes turning into monsters. Today, as the suppressive orthodoxy of the Cathedral comes unstrung, in various ways, and numerous senses, a time of monsters is approaching.

The central dogma of the Cathedral has been formalized as the Standard Social Scientific Model (SSSM) or 'blank slate theory'. It is the belief, completed in its essentials by the anthropology of Franz Boas, that every legitimate question about mankind is restricted to the sphere of culture. Nature permits that 'man' is, but never determines what man is. Questions directed towards natural characteristics and variations between humans are themselves properly understood as cultural peculiarities, or even pathologies. Failures of 'nurture' are the only thing we are allowed to see.

Because the Cathedral has a consistent ideological orientation, and sifts its enemies accordingly, comparatively detached scientific appraisal of the SSSM easily veers into raw antagonism. As Simon Blackburn remarks (in a thoughtful review of Steven Pinker's The Blank Slate), "The dichotomy between nature and nurture rapidly acquires political and emotional implications. To put it crudely, the right likes genes and the left likes culture …"

At the limit of reciprocal loathing, hereditarian determinism confronts social constructivism, with each committed to a radically pared-back model of causality. Either nature expresses itself as culture, or culture expresses itself in its images ('constructions') of nature. Both of these positions are trapped at opposite sides of an incomplete circuit, structurally blinded to

the culture of practical naturalism, which is to say: the techno-scientific / industrial manipulation of the world.

Acquiring knowledge and using tools is a single dynamic circuit, producing techno-science as an integral system, without real divisibility into theoretical and practical aspects. Science develops in loops, through experimental technique and the production of ever more sophisticated instrumentation, whilst embedded within a broader industrial process. Its advance is the improvement of a machine. This intrinsically technological character of (modern) science demonstrates the efficiency of culture as a complex natural force. It neither expresses a pre-existing natural circumstance, nor does it merely construct social representations. Instead, nature and culture compose a dynamic circuit, at the edge of nature, where fate is decided.

According to the self-reinforcing presupposition of modernization, to be understood is to be modifiable. It is to be expected, therefore, that biology and medicine co-evolve. The same historical dynamic that comprehensively subverts the SSSM through inundating waves of scientific discovery simultaneously volatilizes human biological identity through biotechnology. There is no essential difference between learning what we really are and re-defining ourselves as technological contingencies, or technoplastic beings, susceptible to precise,

scientifically-informed transformations. 'Humanity' becomes intelligible as it is subsumed into the technosphere, where information processing of the genome – for instance — brings reading and editing into perfect coincidence.

To describe this circuit, as it consumes the human species, is to define our bionic horizon: the threshold of conclusive nature-culture fusion at which a population becomes indistinguishable from its technology. This is neither hereditarian determinism, nor social constructivism, but it is what both would have referred to, had they indicated anything real. It is a syndrome vividly anticipated by Octavia Butler, whose Xenogenesis trilogy is devoted to the examination of a population beyond the bionic horizon. Her Oankali 'gene traders' have no identity separable from the biotechnological program that they perpetually implement upon themselves, as they commercially acquire, industrially produce, and sexually reproduce their population within a single, integral process. Between what the Oankali are, and the way they live, or behave, there is no firm difference. Because they make themselves, their nature is their culture and (of course) reciprocally. What they are is exactly what they do.

Religious traditionalists of the Western Orthosphere are right to identify the looming bionic horizon with a (negative) theological event. Techno-scientific auto-production specifically supplants

the fixed and sacralized essence of man as a created being, amidst the greatest upheaval in the natural order since the emergence of eukaryotic life, half a billion years ago. It is not merely an evolutionary event, but the threshold of a new evolutionary phase. John H. Campbell heralds the emergence of Homo autocatalyticus, whilst arguing: "In point of fact, it is hard to imagine how a system of inheritance could be more ideal for engineering than ours is."

John H. Campbell? – a prophet of monstrosity, and the perfect excuse for a monster quote:

"Biologists suspect that new forms evolve rapidly from very tiny outgroups of individuals (perhaps even a single fertilized female, Mayr, 1942) at the fringe of an existing species. There the stress of an all but uninhabitable environment, forced inbreeding among isolated family members, "introgression" of foreign genes from neighboring species, lack of other members of the species to compete against or whatever, promotes a major reorganization of the genomic program, possibly from modest change in gene structure. Nearly all of these transmogrified fragments of species die out, but an occasional one is fortunate enough to fit a new viable niche. It prospers and expands into a new species. Its conversion into a statistically constrained gene pool then stabilizes the species from further evolutionary

change. Established species are far more notable for their stasis than change. Even throwing off a new daughter species does not seem to change an existing species. No one denies that species can gradually transform and do so to various extents, but this so-called "anagenesis" is relatively unimportant compared to geologically-sudden major saltation in the generation of novelty.

Three implications are important.

1. Most evolutionary change is associated with the origin of new species.

2. Several modes of evolution may operate simultaneously. In this case the most effective dominates the process.

3. Tiny minorities of individuals do most of the evolving instead of the species as a whole.

A second important characteristic of evolution is self-reference (Campbell, 1982). The Cartesian cartoon of an autonomous external "environment" dictating the form of a species like a cookie cutter cutting stencils from sheets of dough is dead, dead wrong. The species molds its environment as profoundly as the environment "evolves" the species. In particular, the organisms cause the limiting conditions of the environment over which

they compete. Therefore the genes play two roles in evolution. They are the targets of natural selection and they also ultimately induce and determine the selection pressures that act upon them. This circular causality overwhelms the mechanical character of evolution. Evolution is dominated by feedback of the evolved activities of organisms on their evolution.

The third seminal realization is that evolution extends past the change in organisms as products of evolution to change in the process itself. Evolution evolves (Jantsch, 1976; Balsh, 1989; Dawkins, 1989; Campbell, 1993). Evolutionists know this fact but have never accorded the fact the importance that it deserves because it is incommensurate with Darwinism. Darwinists, and especially modern neodarwinists, equate evolution to the operation of a simple logical principle, one that is prior to biology: Evolution is merely the Darwinian principle of natural selection in action, and this is what the science of evolution is about. Since principles cannot change with time or circumstances, evolution must be fundamentally static.

Of course, biological evolution is not like this at all. It is an actual complex process, not a principle. The way that it takes place can, and indisputably does, change with time. This is of utmost importance because the process of evolution advances as it proceeds (Campbell, 1986). Preliving matter in the earth's

primordial soup was able to evolve only by subdarwinian "chemical" mechanisms. Once these puny processes created gene molecules with information for their self-replication then evolution was able to engage natural selection. Evolution then wrapped the self-replicating genomes within self-replicating organisms to control the way that life would respond to the winds of selection from the environment. Later, by creating multicellular organisms, evolution gained access to morphological change as an alternative to slower and less versatile biochemical evolution. Changes in the instructions in developmental programs replaced changes in enzyme catalysts. Nervous systems opened the way for still faster and more potent behavioral, social and cultural evolution. Finally, these higher modes produced the prerequisite organization for rational, purposeful evolution, guided and propelled by goal-directed minds. Each of these steps represented a new emergent level of evolutionary capability.

Thus, there are two distinct, but interwoven, evolutionary processes. I call them "adaptive evolution" and "generative evolution." The former is familiar Darwinian modification of organisms to enhance their survival and reproductive success. Generative evolution is entirely different. It is the change in a process instead of structure. Moreover, that process is ontological. Evolution literally means "to unfold" and what is

unfolding is the capacity to evolve. Higher animals have become increasingly adept at evolving. In contrast, they are not the least bit fitter than their ancestors or the lowest form of microbe. Every species today has had exactly the same track record of survival; on average, every higher organism alive today still will leave only two offspring, as was the case a hundred million years ago, and modern species are as likely to go extinct as were those in the past. Species cannot become fitter and fitter because reproductive success is not a cumulative parameter.

For racial nationalists, concerned that their grandchildren should look like them, Campbell is the abyss. Miscegenation doesn't get close to the issue. Think face tentacles.

Campbell is also a secessionist, although entirely undistracted by the concerns of identity politics (racial purity) or traditional cognitive elitism (eugenics). Approaching the bionic horizon, secessionism takes on an altogether wilder and more monstrous bearing – towards speciation. The folks at euvolution capture the scenario well:

Reasoning that the majority of humankind will not voluntarily accept qualitative population-management policies, Campbell points out that any attempt to raise the IQ of the whole human race would be tediously slow. He further points out that the

general thrust of early eugenics was not so much species improvement as the prevention of decline. Campbell's eugenics, therefore, advocates the abandonment of Homo sapiens as a 'relic' or 'living fossil' and the application of genetic technologies to intrude upon the genome, probably writing novel genes from scratch using a DNA synthesizer. Such eugenics would be practiced by elite groups, whose achievements would so quickly and radically outdistance the usual tempo of evolution that within ten generation the new groups will have advanced beyond our current form to the same degree that we transcend apes.

When seen from the bionic horizon, whatever emerges from the dialectics of racial terror remains trapped in trivialities. It's time to move on.

Lure of the Void (Part 1)

AUGUST 15, 2012

The Frontier of Disillusionment.

…the idea that we are no longer able to accomplish feats we once could do (like travel to the Moon) clashes with the prevailing narrative that we march forever forward. Not only can't we get to the Moon at present, but the U.S. no longer has a space shuttle program — originally envisioned to make space travel as routine as air travel. And for that matter, I no longer have the option to purchase a ticket to fly trans-Atlantic at supersonic speeds on the Concorde. Narratives can break.
— Tom Murphy (bolding in original)

Shanghai's 2010 World Expo included an entire pavilion dedicated to urban futures. Among the exhibits was a looping

video on a large screen, depicting varieties of futuristic city-types as speculative animations, light-heartedly, and with obvious orientation to youngsters. Since children are the denizens of the future, it makes sense to treat them as the target audience for a vision of tomorrow's world, but the effect was also disconcerting, as if parenthesizing what was shown in a form of deniable, non-abrasive irony. This is what the future used to look like. Does it still? On this point, a subtle reserve concealed itself as a concession to childish credibility, or even inconsequential fantasy.

One of the four future cities on display had been constructed off-planet, in earth-orbit. It was populated by happy humans (or, at least, humanoids). No date was predicted. Untethered from firm futuristic commitment, it intersected adult perception as a fragment of cross-cultural memory.

Imagine a city in space, as a child might. Given the strategic obscurity of this statement, when encountered at a carefully-crafted international event, in a sophisticated, cosmopolitan, global, Chinese city, in 2010, it is tempting to approach it through analogy. Half a century ago, when Western children were encouraged to imagine such things, during the twilight decades of modernity (1.0), was a sincere promise being made to them that they would inherit the solar system? If so, is such a

promise now being humorously referenced, or is it being re-directed, and re-made?

The 2010 Expo had a Space Pavilion, too, which only deepened the perplexity. Given the opportunity to re-activate Expo traditions of techno-industrial grandiosity, it was a spectacular miss-launch, containing almost nothing in the way of monumental hardware. The content fell into two broad categories: video-based immersive special effects (highly-appreciated by kids), and vanilla-domestic applications of space technology, on the approximate model of NASA's lamentable "we're the guys who brought you the non-stick frying-pan" PR campaign. Anybody hoping for soul-crushing cyclopean military-analog launch vehicles and the acrid stink of rocket fuel had clearly wandered into the wrong century. Contemporary international etiquette prevailed, and according to that, the business of blazing into orbit is far too crude – even primitive — to be vigorously publicized.

So even in China, at least in its 2010 window to the world, off-planet aspirations were stirred together indissolubly with childhood fantasy. The unmistakable insinuation, harmonized with the commanding heights of world opinion, was that such hard SF dreams had been outgrown. Rather than staring through a window into the spark-torched clangorous workshop of

China's emerging national space program, Western visitors found their gazes bounced from mirrored glass, into a 'postmodern' vacuum of collapsed expectations, amongst the eroded ruins of Apollo. Four decades of Occidental space failure smiled politely back. You lost it, didn't you? (A quick trip across the Huangpu to the drearily mundane USA Pavilion sufficed for unambiguous confirmation.)

The dismissal of a human off-planet future as a childish dream has plenty to build upon. The world's publishers and book shops have long accommodated their classification systems to the sleazy ambiguity of the 'science fiction / fantasy genre', in which futurism smears into oneirism, and the vestiges of hard SF programs (telecommunication satellites, moon bases, space elevators…) are scattered amongst fantastic elves-in-space mythologies (from Star Wars to Avatar). Competitive prophecies decay into polemical allegories, making statements about anything and everything except the shape of the future.

Of all the cultural ripples from the truncation of the Apollo-era space trajectory, none is more telling than the rising popularity of 'Moon Hoax' conspiracy theorizing. Not satisfied with the prospective evacuation of the heavens, the moon hoaxers began systematically editing space-travelers out of the past, beginning with the lunar landings. Whilst clearly maddening to space

technologists, American patriots, NASA supporters, and sensible types in general, this form of 'denialism' is not only historically comprehensible, but even inevitable. If nobody seriously contests the fact that Columbus reached the New World, it is at least in part because what was then started kept happening. Something began, and continued. Nothing comparable can be said about the process of lunar colonization, and that, in itself, is a provocative oddity. When forecasts are remembered, abandoned outcomes can be expected to mess up memories.

Old-school space enthusiast Sylvia Engdahl finds the whole situation pathological, and subjects it to a kind of jerry-built psychoanalysis. With defiant optimism, she attributes "the present hiatus in space travel" to xenophobic trauma:

Much is said about the positive effect of the photos of Earth obtained by Apollo 8, which for the first time showed our planet as a globe, a fragile refuge amid barren surroundings, and thereby launched the environmental movement. The concomitant negative impact — the spread of gut-level knowledge that space is an actual place containing little that's familiar to us and perhaps much that we'd rather not meet — is not spoken of. But it may be no less significant. Could this be one of the reasons why interest in space died so soon after the

first Moon landing, resulting in the cancellation of the last few planned Apollo missions?

She elaborates:

Most people do not want to contemplate the significance of an open universe. They do not let uneasiness about it into their minds, but underneath, as the collective unconscious of humankind absorbs the knowledge, they grasp it, and react with dismay disguised as apathy. It does not occur to them that they might be disturbed by the prospect of space exploration. Rather, they believe that although in theory they want humankind to reach new worlds, it's of low priority compared to the problems of here and now. … [T]he widespread conviction that the public no longer cares about space may also be a rationalization.

Engdahl hints at a modern variant of the Orpheus myth, and captures something of arresting significance. We were told not to look back from orbit, but of course, we did, and what we saw pulled us back down. The damnation of our extraterrestrial out-leap gave birth to a lucid environmentalist vision — the earth seen from space. That is why Tom Murphy turns to the Grand Archdruid of the Ancient Order of Druids in America, John Michael Greer, to transmute elegiac disillusionment into acceptance:

The orbiters are silent now, waiting for the last awkward journey that will take them to the museums that will warehouse the grandest of our civilization's failed dreams. There will be no countdown, no pillar of flame to punch them through the atmosphere and send them whipping around the planet at orbital speeds. All of that is over. …In the final analysis, space travel was simply the furthest and most characteristic offshoot of industrial civilization, and depended — as all of industrial civilization depends — on vast quantities of cheap, highly concentrated, readily accessible energy. That basic condition is coming to an end around us right now.

Disillusionment is simply awakening from childish things, the druids tell us. This is a point Murphy is keen to endorse: "space fantasies can prevent us from tackling mundane problems." Intriguingly, his initial step towards acceptance involves a rectification of false memory, through a (sane) analog of 'Moon Hoax' denial. Surveying his students on their understanding of recent space history ("since 1980 or so"), he discovered that no less than 52% thought humans had departed the earth as far as the moon in that time (385,000 km distant). Only 11% correctly understood that no manned expedition had escaped Low Earth Orbit (LEO) since the end of the Apollo program (600 km out). Recent human space activity, at least in the way it was imagined,

had not taken place. It was predominantly a collective hallucination.

Murphy's highly-developed style of numerate druidism represents the null hypothesis in the space settlement debate: perhaps we're not out there because there's no convincing reason to expect anything else. Extraterrestrial space isn't a frontier, even a tough one, but rather an implacably hostile desolation that promises nothing except grief and waste. There's some scientific data to be gleaned, and also (although Murphy doesn't emphasize this) opportunities for political theatrics. Other than that, however, there's nothing beyond LEO worth reaching for.

The neo-druidic starting point is unapologetically down to earth. It begins with energy physics, and the remorseless fact that doing just about anything heats things up. According to Murphy's calculations, a modest 2.3% global economic growth rate suffices to bring the planetary surface to the boiling point of water within four centuries, even in the complete absence of (positive) greenhouse effects. Economic growth is essentially exponential, and that guarantees that we're cooked, due to elementary thermodynamic principles, efficiency limits, and the geophysics of heat dissipation. Within this big picture, conventional 'energy crisis' concerns are no more than

complicating details, although Murphy engages them thoroughly. (He provides a neat summary of his argument, with internal links, here.)

From the neo-druidic perspective, the space 'frontier' is a horizon of sheer escapism, attracting those who stubbornly deny the necessity of limitation (pestilential growth-addicts):

…relying on space to provide an infinite resource base into which we grow/expand forever is misguided. Not only is it much harder than many people appreciate, but it represents a distraction to the message that growth cannot continue on Earth and we should get busy planning a transition to a non-growth-based, truly sustainable existence.

Since plenty of irrepressible growth-mongers seriously want to get out there, Murphy trowels on the discouragement in thick, viscous layers. Most of the deterrent factors are relatively familiar, but none of them are frivolous, or easily dismissed. The principal problem is the most qualitative (and druidic): human adaptation to terrestrial conditions. This is strikingly illuminated by a consideration of terrestrial 'frontier' environments that remain almost entirely unexploited, despite environmental features that are overwhelmingly more benign than anything to be found off-planet. When compared to any conceivable space

station, asteroid mining camp, lunar base, or Mars colony, even the most 'difficult' places on earth — the seabed, for instance, or the Antarctic — are characterized by extreme hospitability, with ready access to breathable air, nutrients, fuels, and other essential resources, a moderate temperature range, protection from cosmic radiation, and proximity to existing human settlements. This is to be contrasted with typical extraterrestrial conditions of hard vacuum, utter exposure, complete absence of bio-compatible chemistry, and mind-jarring distances.

Murphy touched upon these distances in his survey of student space ignorance. If earth is represented by a "standard" 30-centimeter globe, LEO is 1.5 centimeters from the surface, and the moon a full 9 meters further out. For intuitive purchase upon more expansive space visions, however, a re-calibration is required.

It makes sense to model the earth as a small apple (8.5 cm in diameter), because then an astronomical unit (AU, the mean earth-sun distance of roughly 150 million kilometers, 93 million miles, or 500 light seconds) shrinks to a kilometer, with the sun represented by a sphere a little over 10 meters in diameter. The moon now lies less than 2.7 meters out from our toy earth, but Mars is never less than 400 meters away, the nearest asteroids a kilometer away. The distance to the edge of the planetary solar

system (Neptune) is at least 29 kilometers, and within this spatial volume (a sphere of roughly 113,400 AU^3), less than one part in 27 billion is anything other than desolate vacuum, with almost all the rest being solar furnace. On the toy scale, the outer edge of the solar system, and the Oort cloud, lies 50,000 kilometers from the earth. The distance from our shriveled apple to the nearest star, Proxima Centauri, is 277,600 toy kilometers (or 41.5 trillion real ones).

If space colonization is being construed as an escape from terrestrial resource constraints, then a pattern of activity needs to be knitted across these distances, producing — at a minimum — an energy surplus. In a non-frictional kinetic system, governed almost purely by (macroscopic) conservation of momentum, the basic currency of space activity is 'delta-v', or the transformation of velocity. Delta-v is broadly proportional to energy expenditure on "small burns", when fuel consumption makes a negligible difference to total propelled mass, but when complete flights or "large burns" are calculated, the math becomes nonlinear, since the reduction of fuel payload becomes a critical factor in the equation (subtracting inertial resistance as it adds motive force). In practical terms, the prospective off-planet ('space-faring') energy economy consists of the consumption of propellant to move propellant about, with non-

fuel vehicle mass contributing little more than a rounding error in the calculations.

Somewhat counter-intuitively, it is possible to get the rocket moving faster than the exhaust velocity once the fuel mass exceeds 63% of the total initial mass. In order to get delta-v values in the 20 km/s range when the exhaust velocity is less than 5 km/s requires almost nothing but fuel. …[T]he large delta-v's required to get around the solar system require a lot of fuel…

This double-registry of fuel within the nonlinear equations of "rocket math" – as payload and propellant – is the key to Murphy's deep skepticism about the viability of off-planet energy economics. The fuel resources strewn within the inner solar system – even assuming their absolute abundance – cannot be moved around usefully for less energy than they provide. Jupiter offers the most tantalizing example. This methane-rich gas giant might be superficially apprehended as an immense cosmic fuel depot, but even the most generous calculations of delta-v requirements for a Jupiter 'tanker-run' imply energy expenditures at least an order of magnitude higher than energy obtained – from the 'scooping' operation alone. The inner solar-system is abundant in "stranded resources" that cannot

conceivably be extracted at a cost lower than their value. That, at least, is the coherent neo-druidic perspective.

…and yet, in the yawning void, where the space settlements were meant to have been, the stirrings have not ceased. There even seems to be, unmistakably, a quickening of pace. Chinese 'Taikonauts', private (American) 'NewSpace' businesses, and ever more advanced robots are venturing out beyond the wreckage of dead dreams. Are they heading anywhere that works, or that even makes sense?

Lure of the Void (Part 2)

SEPTEMBER 6, 2012

The right stuff in the rough.

… it's important to understand what Apollo was, and wasn't. It was a victory in the Cold War over the Soviets, but because we were at war, we waged it with a state socialist enterprise. What it was not was the first step of opening up the frontier to humanity, and it was in fact a false start that has created a template for NASA and a groove in which we've been stuck for over four decades now, with many billions spent and little useful progress.
— Rand Simberg

The opening of the American west in the first decades of the 19th century and the opening of the space frontier in these first decades of the 21st century are very similar.
— Mike Snead

Fascism makes our heads spin, which is unfortunate, because an inability to gaze unwaveringly into the dominant 'third way' model of political economy (corporate nationalism) makes the history of the last century unintelligible. For amateur space historians, dropping in briefly on the Moon Nazis is simply unavoidable.

SS Sturmbannführer Wernher von Braun, Deputy Associate Administrator for Planning at NASA Headquarters, Washington DC (1970-2), helps with the introduction. Technical director of the Nazi rocket program at Peenemünde, which culminated in the creation of the A-4 (V-2) ballistic missile, von Braun was brought to America in 1945 as the top prize of Operation Paperclip. His contribution to US rocket development, through Redstone to Apollo (and the moon), was central and indispensable. NASA Socialism was born on the Dark Side of the Moon. (This probably isn't the right time to wander too deeply into Pynchon territory, but, roughly speaking, that's where we are.)

If fascism sounds unduly harsh, more comfortable terminology lies within easy reach. 'Technocracy' will do fine. The name is less important than the essentials, which were already clearly formulated in the work of a previous German immigrant to the United States, Friedrich List, who devoted an influential book to outlining The National System of Political Economy (1841). According to List, the 'cosmopolitanism' of mainstream (Smithean) political economy was insufficiently attentive to the collective national interest. Industrial development was too important to be surrendered to the interplay of private economic agents, and should instead be considered a strategic imperative, within the context of international competition. Only by leveraging the power of the state to regulate trade, foster modern industries, and drive the development of critical infrastructure, could a country hope to advance its interests in the international arena. Development was war by other means, and sometimes the same ones.

When eagerly embraced by Henry Clay, who connected List's ideas with the founding tradition from Alexander Hamilton, these ideas became the basis of the American System. Economic nationalism was to be pursued along the threefold path of managed trade (tariffs), state-controlled finance (central banking), and state-directed infrastructure development (especially transportation systems). Such policies were already

'progressive' or fascist technocratic in that they subordinated private-cosmopolitan economic interests to national purposes, but this took place flexibly, without the more recent encrustations of anti-business class warfare, large-scale entitlement spending, or Cathedralist cultural policing. Capitalism was to be steered, and even promoted, rather than milked, deliberately ruined, or replaced. Due to its patriotic direction, elitism, and affinity with militarization, this technocratic progressivism could easily be understood as a phenomenon of 'the right', or at least (in Walter Russell Mead's words) the "Bipartisan Establishment."

Apollo perfectly exemplified American technocratic progressivism in the teutonized, neo-Hamiltonian tradition. A small step for a man, and a substantial leap for mankind, it was a colossal high-jump for the US Leviathan, marking an unambiguous triumph in the structured competition with its principal geo-strategic and ideological rival. The Apollo program wasn't exactly part of the ballistic missile arms race with the Soviet Union, but it was close enough to contribute to its symbolic, mass-psychological, and deterrent purpose. Landing a man on the moon was a type of overkill, relative to landing a nuke on Moscow, and it expressed a super-abundant payload-delivery capability that had won a war of messages.

In an article originally published in The American Spectator (November 10, 2010), Iain Murray and Rand Simberg describe the moon race as Big Government's Final Frontier, remarking that:

There's something about space policy that makes conservatives forget their principles. Just one mention of NASA, and conservatives are quite happy to check their small-government instincts at the door and vote in favor of massive government programs and harsh regulations that stifle private enterprise.

They conclude:

It is time for conservatives to recognize that Apollo is over. We must recognize that Apollo was a centrally planned monopolistic government program for a few government employees, in the service of Cold War propaganda and was therefore itself an affront to American values. If we want to seriously explore, and potentially exploit space, we need to harness private enterprise, and push the technologies really needed to do so.

Whilst it would be pointlessly upsetting to translate this into a call for the denazification of outer space, it would be equally misleading to read it as nothing of the kind. Progressive technocracy, in a range of national flavors, is the only effective

space politics the world has ever seen, and it is still far more likely — in the near-term — to be modernized than radically supplanted. Space development poses such an immense collective challenge that it sucks even liberty-oriented conservatives such as Simberg towards accommodation with the activist, catalytic, neo-Hamiltonian state. At least initially, there's simply no other place where the clanking machinery of Leviathan is more at home.

Popular culture has picked up on this well. Among the many reasons for the ecstatic reception to Ridley Scott's Alien (1979) was appreciation for its 'realistic' tonal portrait of practical space activity. Science and commerce played their parts, but the leading edge was dominated by quasi-military heavy metal, funded by massive budgets based on gravely obscure strategic objectives, directed and crewed by hard, obedient, buzz-cut types who did whatever it took to get things done. Weapons research trumped all other considerations. Breaking out into the deep frontier required a rigid, armored-bulkhead seriousness that civilians would never quite understand.

When suddenly stripped of its Cold War context, the proxy warfaring of the rocket-state lost coherent motivation, and immediately veered off course into increasingly ludicrous pseudo-objectives. By the closing years of the 20th century, all

pretense of a big push outwards had been dissipated amongst commoditized LEO satellite maintenance, unconvincing zero-gravity science projects, ritualistic space-station diplomacy, multicultural astronaut PR, and even cynical make-work schemes for dangerously competent ex-Soviet technicians. Clever science continued, based on robot probes and space telescopes, but none of that even hinted at an impetus towards space settlement, or even manned spacecraft, and typically advised explicitly against it. Despite all the very real 'right stuff' heroism, putting people in space was a circus act, and perhaps it always had been.

Whatever else outer space may be, it's a place where the right goes schizoid, and the more that it's thought about, the more jagged the split. The seemingly straightforward, dynamic-traditional, and extremely stimulating 'image' of the frontier illuminates the point. The frontier is a space of attenuated formal authority, where entrepreneurial, 'bottom-up' processes of social formation and economic endeavor are cultivated amongst archetypal 'rugged individualists', its affinity with libertarian impulses so tight that it establishes the ('homesteading') model of natural property rights, and yet, equally undeniably, it is a zone of savage, informal warfare, broken open as a policy decision, pacified through the unremitting application of force, and developed as a strategic

imperative, in the interest of territorial-political integration. By fleeing the state, in the direction of the frontier, the settler or colonist extends the reach of the state towards the frontier, drawing it outwards, and enhancing its ferocity, or roughening it. The path of anti-governmental flight confuses itself with a corresponding expansion, hardening, and re-feralization of the state, as the cavalry learn from the Indians, in a place without rules. Then the railroad comes. The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress meets Starship Troopers.

"A strategy for achieving economic benefit from space must involve both government and industry, as did the development of the American West," argues Martin Elvis, and no one seriously disagrees. Whenever realism is prioritized on the extraterrestrial horizon, some variant of rough-and-dirty technocratic progressivism always waits on the launch-pad, ready to piggy-back business off-planet on patriotic, Leviathan-funded, first-stage boosters. Over-hasty denazification is strictly for earth-bound softies The neo-Hamiltonian jump-leads work too well to drop. As usual, Simberg expresses this best:

The United States should become a spacefaring nation, and the leader of a spacefaring civilization.

That means that access to space should be almost as routine (if not quite as affordable) as access to the oceans, and with similar laws and regulations. It means thousands, or millions, of people in space — and not just handpicked government employees, but private citizens spending their own money for their own purposes. It means that we should have the capability to detect an asteroid or comet heading for Earth and to deflect it in a timely manner. Similarly it means we should be able to mine asteroids or comets for their resources, for use in space or on Earth, potentially opening up new wealth for the planet. It means that we should explore the solar system the way we did the West: not by sending off small teams of government explorers — Lewis and Clark were the extreme exception, not the rule — but by having lots of people wandering around and peering over the next rill in search of adventure or profit.

We should have massively parallel exploration — and not just exploration, but development, as it has worked on every previous frontier.

Which brings us to 'NewSpace'…

[Next]

Lure of the Void (Part 3a)

SEPTEMBER 29, 2012

There are two related questions posed by human exploration. First, is there anything economically useful to do out there, that pays your way? And second, can you live off the land, and use local resources to survive, or will we always be tied to support from earth? If the answer to both is yes, then you get space colonies, self-sustainable life off-planet. If the answer to both is no, then space is like Mt. Everest. Tourists might go to Mt. Everest, sherpas might make a living off of it, but no one really lives there.

If the answer is that you can live off the land, but it's not economically useful, it's like Antarctica. It was 40 years between the last time we were there, when Shackleton reached Antarctica, and when the U.S. Navy went back in 1912. There's

a similar lapse between going to the Moon the first time and, hopefully, when we'll return. In that case, you can form an outpost and live there, but you're sustained by constant funding, since engineering doesn't pay for itself. If the answer is that there are economically useful things to do, such as mining Helium-3 on the Moon, but we're always reliant on Earth for basic necessities, then space becomes a North Sea oil platform. You can make money there, but it will always be a hostile environment.

These are four very radically different human futures. And they're all part of a larger question: Is there a human future beyond Earth? It's a question ranks up there with whether there's intelligent life elsewhere in the universe. We can search for life with probes and telescopes, but to determine the living range of humanity, we're going to have to send humans into space.
— Scott Pace

What should the payload be? It does not matter. That is the point. This is not about getting a useful payload into space: That is almost irrelevant. It is about guaranteeing a market for companies offering launch services to get things going. I mean this totally. If we could think of nothing better to launch, concrete blocks would be fine. My philosophy is:

Launching anything is good. — Paul Almond

The material base for a space-faring future is not only stranded in space, but also stranded in time. Not only are the gravitationally-unlocked resources from which it would assemble itself strewn across intimidating immensities of vacant distance, but the threshold where it all begins to come together – in an autocatalytic extraterrestrial economy – is separated from the world of present, practical incentives by dread gulfs of incalculable loss. In a variant of the old joke, if getting off-planet is the goal, a planet is the absolutely worst place to set out from. "I can tell you how to get there," the local helpfully remarked. "But you shouldn't start from here."

Being out there could quickly start to make sense, as long as we were already there. Experimenting with this perspective-switch makes the animating impulse clearer. Most tellingly, it exposes how deeply planets suck, so that merely not being on one is worth almost anything. That's the end game, the final strategy, ultimately arranging everything, with anti-gravity as the key.

Once gravity is perceived as the natural archetype of imprisonment, keeping you somewhere, whether you want to be there or not, the terrestrial-economic motivations for off-planet expansion are revealed in their fundamental spuriousness. The

reason to be in space is to be in space, freed from planetary suckitude, and any benefits to Earth-dwellers that accrue on the way are mere stepping stones. Off-planet resources diverted to the surface of the Earth are, in the ultimate spacer scheme, wasted, or at least strategically sacrificed (since such wastage is almost certainly required in the interim). In the final analysis, the value of anything whatsoever is degraded in direct proportion to the gravitational influences brought to bear upon it, and descent from the heavens is a fall.

A wider cosmo-developmental view sharpens resolution (although this requires that Smart's invaluable insights are strictly set aside, and black holes avoided with maximum prejudice). Smear into fast-forward until the process of extraterrestrial escape has been substantially accomplished, then freeze the screens. Fleeing gravity can now be seen as no more than the first step in a more thorough, antagonistic contestation with gravity and its works. Asteroids and comets are being pulverized, quarried, or bored into sponges, leaving moons, planets, and the sun itself as the local problems of interest. Such bodies are 'problems' because they deform space with gravity wells, which trap resources, but their status as development obstacles can be abstracted further. These worlds, at least partially isolated from the emerging deep-space commercium by their own mass, have been shaped by gravity into approximate

spheres, which is to say – from the developmental perspective – into the very worst shapes that are mathematically possible, since they minimize the ratio of (reactive) surface to volume, and thus restrict resource accessibility to the greatest conceivable extent. Way out there, in deep space and the deep future, the gathering developmental impulse is to go full Vogon, and demolish them completely.

When seen from outside, planets are burial sites, where precious minerals are interred. By digging through the earth's mantle, for instance, all the way down to its interior end, 3,000km beneath the surface, one reaches a high-pressure iron-nickel deposit over 6,500km in diameter – a planet-vaulted metal globe roughly 160,000,000,000 cubic kilometers in size, doped by enough gold and platinum to coat the entire surface of the earth to a depth of half a meter. To a moderately advanced off-world civilization, pondering the practicalities of its first planet-scale demolition, leaving this buried resource trove in place has a robotic-industrial opportunity cost that can be conservatively estimated in the region of 1.6 x 10^23 human-level intelligences, a mineral stockpile sufficient to manufacture a trillion sentient self-replicating probes for every star in the galaxy. (Even ardent conservationists have to recognize how tasty this morsel will look.)

Lift-off, then, is merely a precursor to the first serious plateau of anti-gravity technology, which is oriented towards the more profoundly productive task of pulling things apart, in order to convert comparatively inert mass-spheres into volatile clouds of cultural substance. Assuming a fusion-phase energy infrastructure, this initial stage of off-world development culminates in the dismantling of the sun, terminating the absurdly wasteful main-sequence nuclear process, salvaging its fuel reserves, and thus making the awakened solar-system's contribution to the techno-industrial darkening of the galaxy. (Quit squandering hydrogen, and the lights dim.)

Focus for a few seconds on the economic irritability that arises at the sight of an oil-well flaring off natural gas, through sheer mindless incompetence, then glance at the sun. 'Unsustainable' doesn't begin to capture it. Clearly, this energy machinery is utterly demented, amounting to an Azathothic orgy of spilled photons. The entire apparatus needs to be taken apart, through extreme solar surgery. Since this project has yet to receive sustained consideration, however, the specific engineering details can be safely bracketed for now.

The inexorable logic of techno-industrial efficiency, on its anti-gravity vector, means that the only consistent motivation for leaving the earth is to dismantle the sun (along with the rest of

the solar-system), but that doesn't play well in Peoria. Unsurprisingly, therefore, those sensitized to political realities, media perceptions, and public relations are inclined to emphasize other things, depicting the earth as a destination for cosmic bounty or — even more immediately — for juicy tax-funded pork, rather than as a tricky but highly-rewarding demolition problem.

Conspicuously missing from the public space debate, therefore, is any frank admission that, "(let's face it folks) — planets are misallocations of matter which don't really work. No one wants to tell you that, but it's true. You know that we deeply respect the green movement, but when we get out there onto the main highway of solar-system redevelopment, and certain very rigid, very extreme environmentalist attitudes – Gaian survivalism, terrestrial holism, planetary preservationism, that sort of thing — are blocking the way forward, well, let me be very clear about this, that means jobs not being created, businesses not being built, factories closing down in the asteroid belt, growth foregone. Keeping the earth together means dollars down the drain – a lot of dollars, your dollars. There are people, sincere people, good people, who strongly oppose our plans to deliberately disintegrate the earth. I understand that, really I do, you know – honestly – I used to feel that way myself, not so long ago. I, too, wanted to believe that it was possible to leave

this world in one piece, just as it has been for four billion years now. I, too, thought the old ways were probably best, that this planet was the place we belonged, that we should – and could — still find some alternative to pulling it apart. I remember those dreams, really I do, and I still hold them close to my heart. But, people, they were just dreams, old and noble dreams, but dreams, and today I'm here to tell you that we have to wake up. Planets aren't our friends. They're speed-bumps on the road to the future, and we simply can't afford them anymore. Let's back them up digitally, with respect, yes, even with love, and then let's get to work…" [Thunderous applause]

Since, during the present stage of extraterrestrial ambition, pandering to the partisans of cosmic disintegrationism cannot reasonably be conceived as a sure-fire election winner, it is only to be expected that rhetoric of this kind has been muted. Yet, in the absence of some such vision, or consistently extrapolated alignment with anti-gravity, the off-planet impulse is condemned to arbitrariness, insubstantiality, and insincerity of expression. Absent an uncompromised sense of something else, why not stick to this? The result has been, perhaps predictably, a reign of near-silence on the topic of extraterrestrial projects, even in regard to its most limited, immediate, and practically unobjectionable varieties.

If escaping the earth – and gravitational confinement in general — is not an intelligible end, but only a means, what provides the motivation? It is into this cramped, awkwardly-deformed crevice of aspiration that NewSpace must insinuate itself. To speak of 'insincerity' might seem unduly harsh – since there is no reason to suspect conscious deception, or even carefully-calibrated reservation, when NewSpace advocates outline their plans. An enveloping structure of implausibility nevertheless announces itself in every project that is advanced, manifested through the incommensurability between the scale of the undertaking and the rewards that supposedly incentivize it. Space tourism, asteroid mining, micro-gravity experimentation and manufacturing… really? Is it genuinely imaginable that these paltry goals finally or sufficiently motivate a prolonged struggle against the terrestrial gravity-trap, rather than serving as fragile pretexts or rationalizations for the pursuit of far more compelling, yet hazy, unarticulated, or even completely unsuspected objectives?

When this question is extended backwards, and outwards, it gathers force. Stretch it back to the moon, and out to Mars, and the inference becomes increasingly irresistible. None of these 'missions' made, or make, any sense whatsoever, except insofar as they abbreviate some wider, undisclosed impulse. Space activity is not the means to a targeted end, but the end to be

advanced by a sequence of missions, whose specific content is therefore derivative, and devoid of intrinsic significance. Once the inarticulate outward momentum decays, leaving nothing but an arbitrary extraterrestrial destination to represent it, the naked absurdity that is exposed rapidly extinguishes the last, flickering embers of popular motivation. Four decades of explicit lunar nihilism attest abundantly to that.

Whilst the partial privatization of space activity ('NewSpace') creatively displaces the problem of purpose, it does not radically dispel it. To some degree, NewSpace substitutes the economic motivations of disparate private operators for the political justification of a concentrated public bureaucracy, and by doing so it relieves the pressure to maintain coherent, communicable, and consensual objectives. Space ambitions are freed to enter the fragmented, competitive terrain of idiosyncrasy, variety, experimentation, and even personally-financed frivolity. It might even be thought that seriousness becomes optional.

When examined more doggedly, however, it is clear that the basic problem persists. The terrestrial gravity-well produces a split between the surface of the earth, and 'orbit' (or beyond), and private capital is no less severely divided by this schism than Rocket-State 'public' hardware. Whilst convertible temporarily into forms of inert, stored value, capital is an essentially modern

phenomenon, born in industrial revolution, and typically defined by the diversion of immediate consumption into 'roundabout' production, which is to say: machinery. It is reproduced, or accumulated, by circulating through machines, or apparatus, and it is upon this that the gravity-well compels a decision: is NewSpace capital to be invested, unambiguously, in space?

A serious space program is, fundamentally and irreducibly, a process or terrestrial evacuation. It requires the consistent relocation (or de-location) of enterprise, resources, and productive capabilities from the earth into space, at least until the threshold of extraterrestrial autocatalysis is reached, at which point a break has been achieved, and an autonomous off-planet economy established. Whatever the opportunities for obfuscation (which are probably considerable), the basic decision remains unaffected. The accumulation of a terrestrial fortune is not at all the same, and is in fact almost certainly economically inconsistent, with the sustained investment in an off-planet industrial infrastructure. Either stuff is being shifted into space, irrevocably, or not.

[moon cake break]

Lure of the Void (Part 3b)

OCTOBER 26, 2012

Menace in the west.

Recognizing the head start obtained by the Soviets with their large rocket engines, which gives them many months of lead-time, and recognizing the likelihood that they will exploit this lead for some time to come in still more impressive successes, we nevertheless are required to make new efforts on our own. For while we cannot guarantee that we shall one day be first, we can guarantee that any failure to make this effort will make us last. We take an additional risk by making it in full view of the world, but as shown by the feat of astronaut Shepard, this very risk enhances our stature when we are successful. But this is not merely a race. Space is open to us now; and our eagerness to share its meaning is not governed by the efforts of others. We

go into space because whatever mankind must undertake, free men must fully share. … I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth.

— John F Kennedy

[James Anthony Froude's] "The Bow of Ulysses" … endorses the old colonialism, nostalgically recalling the days when Britain was not an empire, but rather British colonialists were pirates and brigands, who robbed, conquered and eventually ruled, gradually making the transition from mobile banditry to stationary banditry without the British government paying much attention. In "The Bow of Ulysses" Froude condemns nineteenth century imperialism as unworkably left wing, and inevitably leading [to] the destruction of the British empire, and thus the ruin of the subjects of the British empire, all of which ensued as he envisaged … The imperialists, those advocating British Empire, were the left, and the colonialists were the right. And the colonialists correctly predicted that if this were to go on, we would get the left that we now have – one of the many strange facts one encounters if one reads old books.

— James A Donald

The peculiarities of the 'space race' have yet to be fully unfolded. Through its extraordinary formality, reducing extraterrestrial ambitions to a binary, international competition to put the first man on the moon, it seems – retrospectively – to owe more to the culture and history of organized sports than to technological and economic accomplishments. There would, by definition, be a winner and a loser, which is to say a Boolean decision, conventional and indisputable. Then it would be over. Perhaps it was seen to be pointing at something further, but in fact the moon was a finishing line.

Within a broad geo-strategic context, the space race was a symptom of thermonuclear stand-off. A modern history of warfare that had descended inexorably from a restrained game of princes to unleashed total war, amongst ideologically-mobilized peoples, targeting their basic institutions, industrial infrastructures, and even demographic root-stocks, had consummated itself – virtually – in the MAD potential for swift, reciprocal extermination. Under these circumstances, a regressive sublimation was called for, relaying conflict through chivalric representatives – even Homeric heroes – who competed on behalf of the super-lethal populations they appeased. The flight of an astronaut symbolized antagonism, substituting for a nuclear strike. In this sense, victory in the

space race was a thinly-disguised advance payment on the conclusion of the Cold War.

This sublimation is only half of the story, however, because a double displacement took place. Whilst the space race substituted a formal (chivalric) outcome for a military result, it also marginalized the long-envisaged prospect of informal space colonization, replacing it with a predominantly conventional (or socio-political) objective. The price of unambiguous symbolic triumph was a 'triumph' that relapsed into the real ambiguity of (mere) symbolism, with reality-denying, postmodernist, 'moon hoax' temptations already rising. When nothing is won except winning itself, it could scarcely be otherwise. A champion is not a settler, or anything close to one.

What is this real ambiguity? It begins on the frontier, with a series of questions that reaches beyond the meaning of the space race, and into the identity of America. As a country settled within the modern epoch, and thus exhaustively determined by the dynamics of colonialism, America has been condensed from a frontier.

In extended parenthesis, it is worth noting explicitly that the continent's aboriginal population was not yet America, but something earlier, and other, encountered on the frontier. The

idea of a 'Native American' is an exercise in historical misdirection, when it is not merely a thoughtless oxymoron. This is not to suggest that these populations were unable to become American, as many did, once America had begun in the modern period. By innovating distinctive modes of secession, they were even — in certain cases — able to become radically American. A reservation casino in institutional flight from the IRS is vastly more American than the Federal Reserve, in a sense that will (hopefully) become evident.

The foundation of America was a flight into the frontier, extending a trajectory of escape into a perpetually receding space, or open horizon — the future made geography, and only subsequently a political territory. This original, informal, and inherently obscure space project is as old as America itself – exactly as old. As Frederick Jackson Turner had already noted in 1893, for America an open frontier is an existential necessity, which is to say: the basic condition of American existence. Once the frontier closes, borders take over, exceptionality withers into insubstantial rhetoric (or worse, its neoconservative facsimile) and necrosis begins.

In this respect, America cannot be sustained as a state with a space program. It requires an open horizon, extended beyond the earth if necessary, sufficient to support a prolongation of its

constitutive colonial process. Only on and out of this frontier does America have a future, although 'the USA' could (more) comfortably persist without it. That is why, beneath, alongside, and beyond the space race, the frontier 'myth' has been spontaneously extended to extraterrestrial vistas considered as an essentially American prospect. (NASA and its works are quite incidental to this, at best.)

Since this claim invites accusations of gratuitous controversy, it is worth re-visiting it, at a more languid pace. Even after re-emphasizing that America is not the same as – and is indeed almost the precise opposite of – the USA, obvious objections present themselves. Is not the Russian space program the world's most economically plausible? Is not the upward curve of recent Chinese space activity vastly more exuberant? Hasn't the United Nations claimed the heavens on behalf of a common humanity? What, other than cultural-historical accident, and the unwarranted arrogance stemming from it, could imaginably make 'an essentially American prospect' of outer space?

The counter-point to all of these objections is colonialism, understood through its radical, exceptional, American lineage. Colonialism of this ultimate variety consolidates itself from the frontier, and passes through revolutionary thresholds of a very specific type: wars of independence, or secession (rather than

comprehensive regime changes) that are pro-colonial (rather than anti-colonial) in nature. The colony, as colony, breaks away, and in doing so creates a new society. Successful examples of such events are extremely rare – even singular, or exceptional. There is America, and then there are 'lost causes', with considerable (and increasing) overlap between them.

What has any of this to do with outer space, beyond impressionistic analogy? Gravity cements the connection. Dividing the surface of the earth and extraterrestrial space is an effective difference, or practical problem, that can be quite precisely quantified in technological terms (fuel to deliverable payload ratios), and summarized economically. For purposes of comparison, transporting freight across the Pacific costs US$4/kg (by air), or US$0.16/kg by ocean-bound container vessel (US$3,500 per TEU, or 21,600 kg). To lift 1 kg of cargo into Low Earth Orbit (LEO), in stark contrast, costs over US$4,000 (it was over US$10,000 by Space Shuttle). Call it the Rift: an immense structural re-supply problem, incentivizing economic self-sufficiency with overwhelming force. Each kilogram of extraterrestrial product has saved US$4,000 before further calculations get started. Out in space, the Rift is the bottom line: a cold, anti-umbilical reality.

Whatever the historic colonial impetus to the American way – separation and social re-foundation – is reinforced by orders of magnitude in LEO and beyond. This is an environment that might have been precision-engineered for revolutionary colonialism, as science fiction writers have long recognized. On the flip side lies a more obviously explanatory conclusion: Because developments beyond the Rift are inherently uncontrollable, there is no readily discernible motivation for terrestrial political-economic agencies to fund the emergence of off-planet societies that are on an irresistible conveyor-belt to independence, whilst voraciously consuming resources, opening an avenue of escape, and ultimately laying the void foundations for a competitor civilization of a radically unprecedented, and thus ominously unpredictable kind.

It follows clearly that the status quo politics of space colonization are almost fully expressed by space colonization not happening. When understood in relation to the eclipsed undercurrent of the frontier analogy — social fission through revolutionary colonialism or wars of independence — the 'failure' of large-scale space colonization projects to emerge begins to look like something else entirely: an eminently rational determination on the part of the world's most powerful territorial states to inhibit the development of socio-

technological potentials characterized by an 'American' (revolutionary colonial) tendency.

Of course, in a world that grown familiar with interchangeable anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist declarations, the terms of this (Froude / Moldbug / Donald) analysis are initially disconcerting. When detached from the confusions and conflations of a disturbed periphery, however, the pattern is compelling. Colonists are, by their very nature, in flight from the metropolis. It is less than a single step from this acknowledgement to the recognition that they tend to independence of action, social fission, and political disintegration, following trends that imperialists – with equal inevitability — seek to curtail. Since colonization, strictly understood, is cultural and demographic transplantation, it only acquires its sense of expansion when restrained under imperial auspices. Whilst colonial and rebellious are not even close to synonymous expressions, they are nevertheless mutually attracted, in near-direct proportion to the rift that separates colony from metropolis. A colonial venture is a rebellion of the most practical and productive kind, either re-routing a rebellion from time into space, or completing itself in a rebellion that transforms an expedition into an escape. Since the triumph of imperialism over colonialism beginning in the second half of the 19th century, it is only in (and as) America that this system of

relations has persisted, tenuously, and in large measure occulted by the rise of an imperial state.

It is helpful, then, to differentiate in principle (with minimal moral excitability) between a colonial space project, oriented to extraterrestrial settlement, and an imperial space program, or policy, designed to ensure terrestrial control over off-planet development, maintain political integrity, and thus secure returns on investment across the Rift. From the perspective of the territorial state, an (imperial) space program that extracted economic value from beyond earth's gravity well would be ideal, but this is an ambition unsupported by the vaguest flickerings of historical precedent (and obstructed by at least four orders of magnitude of yawning economic gulf). Second best, and quite satisfactory, is the simple prevention of colonial space projects, substituting political space theater as an expensive (but low-risk and affordable) alternative. The occasional man on the moon poses no great threat to the order of the world, so long as we "bring him safely back to earth."

America was an escape from the Old World, and this definition suffices to describe what it still is – insofar as it still is – as well as what it can be, all that it can be, and what any escape from the new old world – if accurately named, would also be. When outlined by the shadows of dark enlightenment, America is the

problem that the USA was designed to solve, the door that the USA closes, the proper name for a society born from flight.

As Nietzsche never exactly said: Am I understood? America against the stars and stripes …

Anarchy on the Old Right

NOVEMBER 6, 2012

About that empty chair …

Over at The American Conservative, the Old Right has expressed its smoldering dismay at the country's political prospects through a fit of paralyzed dissensus.

The 29 members of the TAC symposium split fairly evenly between (Democrat) Barack Obama, (Republican) Mitt Romney, and (Libertarian) Gary Johnson. Each musters four definite commitments, with Andrew J. Bacevich, Leon Hadar, Scott McConnell, and Noah Millman for Obama; Marian Kester Coombs, James P. Pinkerton, Stephen B. Tippins Jr., and John Zmirak for Romney; and Doug Bandow, Peter Brimelow, Scott Galupo, and Bill Kauffman for Johnson.

Philip Giraldi epitomizes the spirit of anti-neoconservative obstreperousness with his declared electoral intentions, wavering between a vote for Johnson, a Ron Paul write-in, or a Romney-spavining Obama choice if the race is tight. James Bovard is also torn between Johnson and a Ron Paul write-in (but without mention of an anti-Romney Obama option). Like Johnson, Romney picks up two additional 'maybes' (from W. James Antle III, Bradley J. Birzer). The Constitution Party's Virgil Goode musters just one solid supporter (Sean Scallon). There's also a write-in for Rand Paul (Daniel McCarthy), and four indecipherables (Jeremy Beer, Rod Dreher, William S. Lind, and Steve Sailer).

Decisive winner among the TAC writers, however, is Nobody, supported by seven unambiguous abstentions (Michael Brendan Dougherty, David Gordon, Robert P. Murphy, Justin Raimondo, Sheldon Richman, and Gerald J. Russello), and probably an eighth (Paul Gottfried, poised at the democratically-abstemious edge of the indecipherables).

Perhaps questions like this are souring the mood.

Why not opt for the real deal?

Regime Redecoration Randoms

NOVEMBER 6, 2012

Which lucky guy gets to take the blame?

Here in Shanghai, we receive the US presidential election results on Wednesday morning, making this the last chance to venture reckless predictions. Who gets to seize the poisoned chalice and assume responsibility for the financial collapse of the United States of America?

Feel the hate. Negativity reigns supreme in this election, with oppositional or defensive motivations almost wholly purified of positive contamination. According to The Economist, negative political ads have accounted for an unprecedented 90% of the total. The words of PJ Media commenter Subotai Bahadur distill the sentiment perfectly: "Romney was not my first, second, or

third choice, but I will crawl over ground glass to vote for him." To be fondly remembered as 'the ground-glass election.'

Way of the Salamander. Urban Future isn't inclined to deride Mormonism as weird (being weird is what religions are for), but there are bound to be significant cultural implications to the inauguration of a Mormon president in an unusually apocalyptic time. The Mormon faith is the science fiction version of Abrahamic religion extending an evolutionary bridge from man to God – a path of practical divinization. No surprise, then, to discover that there's a Mormon Transhumanist Association. When combined with the irreverence that latches onto any decaying, chaos-wracked administration it could get seriously entertaining …but then we'd miss the classic version of Cathedral II (Return of the Clerisy), replaced by a strange re-make. Voters need to choose their flavor of ground glass carefully.

Prophet motive. At Zero Hedge, Strauss & Howe generational cycle-theorist Jim Quinn hangs on to the apocalyptic theme. He argues that – at the brink of the 'Fourth Turning' – Mitt Romney's age, which places him in the 'prophet generation', makes him odds on favorite to lead the global superpower into Armageddon (so we have that to look forward to).

Reckless predictions?

(1) Discounting systematic media dishonesty points to a substantial Romney victory.

(2) Winning this one is going to have been the most stupid thing that the stupid party ever did.

Forward!

NOVEMBER 7, 2012

Maximum warp into Left Singularity.

That was all thoroughly unambiguous. It turns out that Obama really is the FDR for this turn of the gyre. Nate Silver and Paul Krugman are vindicated. The New York Times is the gospel of the age. Conservatism is crushed and humiliated. The brake pedal has been hurled out of the window. There's no stopping it now.

The day before the election, Der Spiegel described "the United States as a country that doesn't understand the signs of the times and has almost willfully — flying in the face of all scientific knowledge — chosen to be backward." For the magazine's staff writers, the problem was utterly straightforward. "The hatred of

big government has reached a level in the United States that threatens the country's very existence." Retrogressive forces were impeding the country's progress by refusing to grasp the obvious identity of Leviathan and social advancement. It should now be obvious to everyone – even charred tea partiers gibbering shell-shocked in the ruins — that contemporary American democracy provides all the impetus necessary to bulldoze such obstructionism aside. The State is God, and all shall bend to its will. Forward!

With the ascension of USG to godhood, a new purity is attained, and a fantastic (and Titanic) experiment progresses to a new stage. It is no longer necessary to enter into controversy with the shattered detritus of the right, henceforth all that matters is the test of strength between concentrated political motivation and the obduracy of reality itself. Which is to say: the final resistance to be overcome is the insolent idea of a reality principle, or outside. Once there is no longer any way of things that exists independently of the State's sovereign desire, Left Singularity is attained. This is the eschatological promise that sings its hallelujahs in every progressive breast. It translates perfectly into the colloquial chant: yes we can!

Of course, it needs to be clearly understood that 'we' – now and going forward – means the State. Through the State we do

anything and everything, which we can, if not really, then at least truly, as promised. The State is 'us' as God. Hegel already saw all this, but it took progressive educational systems to generalize the insight. Now our time has come, or is coming. All together now: yes we can! Nothing but a brittle reactionary realism stands in our way, and that is something we can be educated out of (yes we can). We have! See our blasted enemies strewn in utter devastation before us.

The world is to be as we will it to be. Surely.

What We Deserve

NOVEMBER 9, 2012

Good? Probably not. But hard – oh yes (oh yes!).

Obama got what he wanted — a second term. Now the people who voted for him are going to get what they voted for… and what they deserve — a financial collapse that makes 2008 seem like the good 'ol days.– 'libertarianNYC'

Because when Maistre says that every nation gets the government it deserves, I believe him. Maistre didn't think his great law was a law of physics. He thought it was a law of God. I am not a religious person, but I agree. History has convinced me that when laws of God are broken, bad shit happens. – Mencius Moldbug

Deserving' must be the most useless and obfuscating word in the dictionary.– Maurice Spandrell

The mysteries of the ideological spectrum are deep enough to absorb endless exploration. Why, for instance, should there be an ideological spectrum at all? Are not human disagreements over social decisions naturally multi-dimensional? How can opinions about the optimum scale of government statistically predict attitudes to affirmative action, immigration, gun control, drug prohibition, abortion, gay marriage, climate change, and foreign policy? Does it not seem near-magical that the seating arrangements of the late-18th century French National Assembly continue to organize the terminology of ideological orientation up to the present day?

At times, however, perplexity recedes, and certain basic patterns emerge with startling clarity. This is evident today in the United States – the world's great circus of ideological antagonism — in the wake of its latest, spectacular performance.

As polarization intensifies – which it does – the essential is expressed through the extremes, and the alternatives are simplified. Which is it to be: politics or economics? There can be no sustainable co-existence. One must utterly eradicate the other.

Either politics, or economics, deserves to be completely destroyed — politics for its incontinent lust for absolute power, or economics for its icy indifference to public concerns. The conflict of visions is irreconcilable. From the pure perspective of terminal politics, all market rewards are arbitrary and illegitimate, whilst from that of economics, people are entitled to precisely nothing.

Speaking on behalf of the political losers, Russ Roberts (at Cafe Hayek) adopts a light-hearted approach:

Talking about the election to many friends and family who had been rooting for Romney, I found their emotions ran the entire gamut from despair to despondency. Everybody was way down. I found myself unexpectedly blue as well. Our emotions were not so much caused by the Romney defeat. Few of us were particularly excited about him. It was the Obama victory that concerned us. … There was plenty to be discouraged about before this election. I'm not sure the election provides much new information.

The despair of the Right is not the product of a single lamentable election result, but is grounded in the relentlessly gathering realization that it is inherently maladapted to politics.

When the Right attains power, it is by becoming something other than itself, betraying its partisans not only incidentally and peripherally, through timidity or incompetence, but centrally and fundamentally, by practically advancing an agenda that almost perfectly negates its supposed ideological commitments. It builds that which it had promised to destroy, and further enthralls that which it had promised to liberate. Its victories mean ever less, its defeats ever more. To win is at most a lesser evil, whilst to lose opens new, unprecedented horizons of calamity, initiating previously unimagined adventures in horror.

Dean Kalahar captures the mood:

The electorates' decision once and for all confirms a definition of America that values hopes, feelings and equality of results over the realities of human nature, history, and the foundational principles that hold western civilization together. There is now no doubt that the tipping point of geometrically increasing cultural decline has been crossed. … Our economic system has lost the culture war.

The left has its own frustrations, which its ever-greater approximation to total political dominion cannot appease, and in fact exacerbate. The more that it subordinates its enemies to its will, the more its will conforms to the image of its enemies – not

the economy as it was, evasive and morally disinterested, but the economy as it was caricatured and denounced: narrowly and brutally self-interested, sublime in its gargantuan greed, radically corrupt, and irreparably dysfunctional. The cartoon plutocrat re-appears as the consummate political insider in a shot-silk Che Guevara tee-shirt, minutely dictating the content of legislation, and pursuing a career trajectory that smoothly alternates between the chairs of regulatory agencies and Wall Street boardrooms. Through a perverse, ineliminable double-entry book-keeping, the fiscal mountains of government largesse are registered, simultaneously, as an orgiastic feast of crony capitalist money creation. Public altruism and private avarice lock into exact logico-mathematical identity.

The gyre turns. 'Right' administrations become sclerotic big government bureaucracies, whilst 'Left' administrations become the cynical public relations façade for rapacious banking cartels. In either case, government equates to treachery, executed by a party that necessarily abuses its own political partisans. Since politics is ever-increasingly the preserve of the Left, this is not an oscillator, but a ratchet, with a predictable direction (into Left Singularity, "moving the electorate ever leftwards by making it ever more dysfunctional").

The Right, the party of the economy, is losing all credibility as a Party, especially to itself. In the war of annihilation that contemporary ideological schism has become, the substitute, characteristic battle-cry could be confidently anticipated, even were it not already so distinctly heard: the market will avenge these offenses. Nemesis. Let the temple crash.

Expect to hear much more of this, however much it revolts you.

Things will fall apart (even more, far more …), or not, but in either case we will know what we really deserve. Reality is God, but which is the true religion?

In the immortal words of HL Mencken: "Democracy is the theory that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard."

Reality Rules

NOVEMBER 20, 2012

Why Social Darwinism isn't going anywhere.

The name social Darwinism is a modern name given to the various theories of society that emerged in England and the United States in the 1870s, which, it is alleged, sought to apply biological concepts to sociology and politics. The term social Darwinism gained widespread currency when used in 1944 to oppose these earlier concepts. Today, because of the negative connotations of the theory of social Darwinism, especially after the atrocities of the Second World War (including the Holocaust), few people would describe themselves as Social Darwinists and the term is generally seen as pejorative. — Wikipedia

… no one calls himself a social Darwinist. Not now, not ever. Not Herbert Spencer. The term is always used to label one's opponents. In that sense it's clearly a more abusive term than "socialist," a term that millions of people have proudly claimed. — David Boaz

Urban Future somehow missed the excited side-track discussion that bolted to the conclusion: America voted in November 2012 to spare itself from Social Darwinism. Yet, sadly belated as it may be, our rejoinder is unchanged: nothing ever gets spared from Darwinism. That's what Darwinism is.

The fact that the term Social Darwinism survives only as a slur is abundantly telling, and suffices on its own to explain the ideological 'evolution' of recent times. In a nutshell, the dominant usage of 'social Darwinism' says "markets are a kind of Nazi thing." Checkmate in one move.

Markets implement a Darwinian process by eliminating failure. Schumpeter called it 'creative destruction'. The principle unit of selection is the business enterprise, which is able to innovate, adapt, propagate, and evolve precisely insofar as it is also exposed to the risk of perishing. None of this is especially complicated, or even controversial. In a sane world it is what 'social Darwinism' would mean. It is certainly what Herbert

Spencer was really talking about (although he never adopted the label).

The fundamental tenet of Social Darwinism would then be compressible into a couple of words: reality rules. There's more, of course, but nothing especially challenging. The further additions are really subtractions, or reservations – intellectual economies, negative principles, and non-commitments. That's because Darwinism – whether 'social' or otherwise – is built from subtractions. Deducting all supernatural causality and transcendent agencies leaves Darwinism as the way complex structures get designed. (Not constructed, but designed, in conformity with a naturalistic theory of plans, blueprints, recipes, or assembly codes, of the kind that have naturally invited supernatural explanation. Darwinism only applies to practical information.)

Subtractions put it together. For instance, remove the extravagant hypothesis that something big and benevolent is looking after us, whether God, the State, or some alternative Super-Dad, and the realistic residue indicates that our mistakes kill us. It follows that anything still hanging around has a history of avoiding serious mistakes, which it may or may not be persisting with – and persistence will tell. If we're forgetting important lessons, we'll pay (in the currency of survival).

If this is mere tautology, as has not infrequently been alleged, then there's not even any need for controversy. But of course, controversy there is, plentifully, and so deeply entrenched that the most banal expositions capture it best. Consider this, from the self-assuredly pedestrian United States History site:

Social Darwinism was the application of Charles Darwin's scientific theories of evolution and natural selection to contemporary social development. In nature, only the fittest survived — so too in the marketplace. This form of justification was enthusiastically adopted by many American businessmen as scientific proof of their superiority.

What is this supremely typical paragraph really saying? That some American businesses survived, were thus seen as "the fittest" (= they had survived), 'justified' (= they had survived), and 'proven to be superior' (= they had survived), in other words, a string of perfectly empty identity statements that is in some way supposed to embody a radically disreputable form of ruthless social extremism. This same systematic logical error, seen with tedious insistence in all instance of commentary on 'social Darwinism', was baptized by Schopenhauer 'hypostasis of the concept'. It seizes upon something, repeats it exactly but in different terms, and then pretends to have added information.

Once this error is corrected for, substantial discussion of the topic is exposed in its full, dazzling vacuity.

A writhing David Boaz cites the Encyclopedia Britannica [entry on Social Darwinism, which describes it as:

… the theory that persons, groups, and races are subject to the same laws of natural selection as Charles Darwin had perceived in plants and animals in nature. According to the theory, which was popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the weak were diminished and their cultures delimited, while the strong grew in power and in cultural influence over the weak…. The poor were the "unfit" and should not be aided; in the struggle for existence, wealth was a sign of success. At the societal level, social Darwinism was used as a philosophical rationalization for imperialist, colonialist, and racist policies, sustaining belief in Anglo-Saxon or Aryan cultural and biological superiority.

It is immediately clear that this passage, too, follows the already-familiar pattern, clocking 'hypostasis of the concept' to the edge of spontaneous combustion. Worse still, it tries to put its hypostasized 'information' to work through the positive proposition — tacitly insinuated rather than firmly stated – that "persons, groups, and races" are something other than "animals in nature." Nature, it seems, ceased to apply at some threshold

of human social development, when people stopped being animals, and became something else. Man is not only doubled (as a natural being and something else), but divided between incommensurable kingdoms, whose re-integration is morally akin to "rationalization for imperialist, colonialist, and racist policies" and – why not admit it? — fascist genocide.

Define nature in such a way that we're not part of it, or you're engaged in Nazi apologetics says Encyclopedia Britannica. There's obviously something about social Darwinism that gets people excited — several things, actually. Plugging the spontaneous theory of laissez faire capitalism into traumatic association with the Third Reich is thrilling enough, especially because that's the basic platform for the epoch of actually existing fascism (which we still inhabit), but there's more.

The most obvious clue, from which the Encyclopedia Britannica passage unravels like a piece of incompetent knitting, is the magical appearance of 'should' – "The poor were the 'unfit' and should not be aided." This is another preposterous hypostasis, naturally (and unnaturally), but equally typical. At the evolution site talkorigins, John S. Wilkins tells us: "'Social Darwinism' … holds that social policy should allow the weak and unfit to fail and die, and that this is not only good policy but morally right." The intellectual perversity here is truly fascinating.

Any naturalistic social theory subtracts, or at least suspends, moral evaluation. It says: this is the way things are (however we might want them to be). Yet here, through hypostatic doubling, or redundancy, such neutral realism is converted into a bizarre, morally-charged stance: nature should happen. Social Darwinism is not attempting to explain, but rather siding with reality (those Nazis!).

This is, quite simply and literally, madness. Left dissatisfied by mere denial of the modest proposition that reality rules, the denunciation of social Darwinism proceeds smoothly to the accusation that realists are aiding and abetting the enemy. The unforgivable crime is to accept that there are consequences, or results, other than those we have agreed to allow.

The reality is that practical decisions have real consequences. If those consequences are annulled by, or absorbed into, a more comprehensive social entity, then that entity inherits them. What it incentivizes it grows into. The failures it selects for become its own. When maladaptive decisions are displaced, or aggregated, they are not dispelled, but reinforced, generalized, and exacerbated. Whatever the scale of the social being under consideration, it either finds a way to work, and to reward what works, or it perishes, whether as a whole, or in pieces. That is

the 'social Darwinism' that will return, eventually, because reality rules, and rather than joining the clamor of denunciation, Boaz would have been prescient to reclaim it.

Left Singularity

JANUARY 7, 2013

Winter is coming.

Leftists are not troubled by the fear that the masses might revolt against the left, but rather each leftist fears he might fail to keep up with the ever changing line, find himself a few years, or weeks, or days behind the current ever changing political correctness, and find himself deemed a rightist. // Which historically halts only in bloodshed. There is no equivalent right singularity, as repressive right wing regimes forbid interest in politics, while repressive left wing regimes command interest in politics. // The left singularity is the same each time in its approach to infinite leftism, but differs chaotically and surprisingly each time in its ending short of infinite leftism. — James A. Donald

What we worry about most is that we'll see a vicious cycle develop: poor governance hurts the economy, which radicalizes and polarizes public opinion, which leads to worse governance and worse economic outcomes… and so on down the line. — Walter Russell Mead

21st Century politics sees no need for truth. When government believes itself to be responsible for the economy and convinces the people of that, it has put itself into a box. …When recessions occur … it causes government to pursue policies which reinforce its lies. It is these policies which created the current economic crisis in the first place.– 'Monty Pelerin' (via Zero Hedge)

Dark Enlightenment begins with the recognition that reality is unpopular, so that the 'natural' course of political development, under democratic conditions, is reliably based upon the promise of an alternative. Pandering to fantasy is the only platform that delivers electoral support. When the dreams turn bad it is politically obvious that they have not been held firmly or sincerely enough, their radicalism has been insufficient, and a more far-reaching solution is imperative. Since either deliberate or merely inertial rightist sabotage is clearly to blame, the beatings will continue until morale improves.

This syndrome, essentially indistinguishable from political modernity, calls for a cybernetic theory of accelerating social deterioration, or self-reinforcing economic repression. The trend that dark enlightenment recoils from demands explanation, which is found in the diagram of Left Singularity.

A singularity, of any kind, is the limit of a process dominated by positive feedback, and thus driven to an extreme. In its pure mathematical expression, the trend is not merely exponential, but parabolic, asymptotically closing upon infinity in finite time. The 'logic of history' converges upon an absolute limit, beyond which further prolongation is strictly impossible. From this ultimate, impassable barrier, dark enlightenment retrogresses into political history, prophetically inflamed by its certainty of the end. Unless democracy disintegrates before the wall, it will hit the wall.

"Increased repression brings increased leftism, increased leftism brings increased repression, in an ever tighter circle that turns ever faster. This is the left singularity," Donald writes. The principal dark hypothesis is evident: on the left slope, failure is not self-corrective, but rather the opposite. Dysfunction deepens itself through the circuit of disappointment:

As society moves ever leftwards, ever faster, leftists get ever more discontented with the outcome, but of course, the only cure for their discontent that it is permissible to think, is faster and further movement left.

It is necessary, then, to accept the leftist inversion of Clausewitz, and the proposition that politics is war by other means, precisely because it retains the Clausewitzean tendency to the extreme (making it 'prone to escalation'). This is the reason why modern political history has a characteristic shape, which combines a duration of escalating 'progress' with a terminal, quasi-punctual interruption, or catastrophe – a restoration or 'reboot'. Like mould in a Petri dish, progressive polities 'develop' explosively until all available resources have been consumed, but unlike slime colonies they exhibit a dynamism that is further exaggerated (from the exponential to the hyperbolic) by the fact that resource depletion accelerates the development trend.

Economic decay erodes productive potential and increases dependency, binding populations ever more desperately to the promise of political remedy. The progressive slope steepens towards the precipice of supreme radicality, or total absorption into the state … and somewhere fractionally before then, either before or after it has stolen everything you own, taken your

children, unleashed mass killing, and descended into cannibalism, it ends.

It can't eat the Petri dish, or abolish reality (in reality). There is a limit. But humanity gets a chance to show what it's capable of, on the downside. As Whiskey commented (on this Sailer thread): "This Enlightenment is 'Dark' because it tells us true things we'd rather not know or read or hear, because they paint a not-so-lovely picture of human nature at its rawest." Progress takes us into the raw.

Gregory Bateson referred to cybernetic escalation as 'schismogenesis', which he identified in a number of social phenomena. Among these was substance abuse (specifically alcoholism), whose abstract dynamics, at the level of the individual, are difficult to distinguish from collective political radicalization. The alcoholic is captured by a schismogenetic circuit, and once inside, the only attractive solution is to head further in. At each step of life disintegration, one needs a drink more than ever. There goes the job, the savings, the wife and kids, and there's nowhere to look for hope except the bar, the vodka bottle, and eventually that irresistible can of floor polish. Escape comes – if it comes before the morgue – in 'hitting bottom'. Escalation to the extreme reaches the end of the road,

or the story, where another might – possibly – begin. Schismogenesis predicts catastrophe.

Hitting bottom has to be horrible. A long history brought you to this, and if this isn't obviously, indisputably, an intolerable state of ultimate degradation, it will carry on. It isn't finished until it really can't go on, and that has to be several notches worse than can be anticipated. Left Singularity is deep into the dregs of the floor polish, with everything gone. It's worse than anything you can imagine, and there's no point at all trying to persuade people they've arrived there before they know they have. 'Things could be better than this' won't cut it. That's what progress is for, and progress is the problem.

That which cannot continue, will stop. Trees do not grow to the sky. This does not, however, necessarily mean that freedom will be restored and everything will be lovely. The last time we had theocracy, we had stagnation for four hundred years.

The explosive expansion of spending and regulation represents a collapse of discipline within the ruling elite. The way the system is supposed to work, and the way it mostly did work several decades ago, is that the American Federal Government can only spend money on something if the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the President agree to spend money on that thing,

so no government employee can be employed, except all three agree he should be employed, so the government cannot do anything unless all three agree that it be done. A public servant, and indeed his entire department, was apt to be fired if he pissed off anyone. Conversely, the individual was free to do anything, unless all three agree that he be stopped from doing that thing. We are now approaching the reverse situation, where for an individual to do anything requires a pile of permissions from diverse governmental authorities, but any governmental authority can spend money on anything unless there is near unanimous opposition to them spending money.

Obviously this cannot continue. Eventually the money runs out, in that we shall have a hyperinflationary crisis, and revert to some other form of money, such as the gold standard. As that happens, the increasingly lawless behavior of the rulers against the ruled will become increasingly lawless behavior of the rulers against each other. Civil war, or something close to civil war, or the dire and immediate threat of civil war will ensue. At that point, we will have the political singularity, probably around 2025 or so. Beyond the singularity, no predictions can be made, other than that the results will be surprising …

End Games

JANUARY 17, 2013

Some time late on the 21st of December last year [2012], Terrestrial Omega Event 2012 streaked past relatively quietly, on a trajectory from the dread realm of ominous premonitions into the cobwebbed vault of defunct absurdities. (The fact that its glancing blow reduced Urban Future to a tangled wreck of smoking weakly radioactive debris need be of no concern to anybody except our five regular readers.) Another non-event was thus added to the long chain of ontological omissions that compose the Apocalyptic Tradition. Things continue, on their existing tracks, as common sense had confidently predicted.

For a world saturated in modernist irony, where even the most passionate beliefs are modulated by forms of mass-media entertainment, no 'Great Disappointment' is any longer

possible, such as that afflicting the Millerites of the mid-1840s. A 2012 Reuters/Ipsos survey found that 10% of the world population (and no less than 20% of Chinese) had 'sincerely' expected the End to arrive on December 21st. When it didn't, so what? There's always something else on — or rather, the same thing, in different flavors.

Channel hopping is especially easy because it isn't even necessary to switch genre. The collapse of the Occidental World Order is like Henry Ford's Model T: "You can have it in any color you like, as long as it's black." What you can't do is get it over with. It's too big to fail, even after it has manifestly failed.

The December non-event was not the End, or even the end of the End, but rather the end of the end of the End. Dated Doomsday has been de-activated, leaving an indefinitely dilated Ending without conclusion. Now that the prospect of a finish has finished, finishing becomes interminable. Dates march onwards, without destination, into ever extended horizons of collapse. Apocalypse, stripped of Armageddon, is normalized. It can now demand undistracted recognition as 'the system', the way of the world, feeding upon the spectacle of permanent crisis through the Media-Apocalypse Complex. As (Fukuyama-final) Liberal Democratic politics adjusts to a chronic state of emergency, it is finally possible to 'get things done', in a time

when nothing can be done. Disinhibited insanity delights in its ultimate mania.

Because it's insanity, it can't really last, but Apocalypse has outlasted Doomsday, and reality has lost its last signs. For purposes of polite conversation, therefore, it is best to grant the Keynesians / Postmodernists absolute triumph, and to concur that the consequences of irrealism can be indefinitely postponed. When in Bedlam, do as the bedlamites do. Anything else would be pointless irascibility, out of keeping with the spirit of the age. After all (except itself) Apocalypse Forever is the final Western religion.

Progressive Apocalypse, Apocalypse Forever, assumes the death of Doomsday, which provides the occasion for an obituary. For reactionaries of the 'Throne and Altar' variety, mourning will incline towards eschatology, as the moment of definitive judgment is interred. Here in the eschaton-blitzed wreckage of Urban Future, however, our remembrance is more concisely arithmetical. We recall dates gone forever, and with them the time inversions that are expressed through countdowns, intensive escalations, and compressions. When the end had a date, time could zero upon it, rather than dissipating into endlessly-extended fogbanks of blighted futurity.

December 21st, 2012, was the last Doomsday date, and thus the day Doomsday died. It might even have been the most popular, but it was very far from the greatest. Extracted predominantly from the calendar of the Mayans, it neatly concluded the 13th Baktun, but in doing so broke quite arbitrarily from the (already awkward and compromised) numerical organization of the dating system, with its preference for modulus-20 unit hierarchies. Whatever the attractions of exoticism, turning to pop Mayanology for a planetary Apocalypse schedule was also radically arbitrary, given the Abrahamic Hegemony that had structured the world order over the previous half millennium. Still, the Maya had conducted their own preliminary experiment in collapse, enabling Mel Gibson to excavate a striking movie from the ruins, introduced by a quote from Will Durant: "A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within."

When estimated in terms of numerical elegance and metaphysical profundity, the truly great Doomsday was Y2K, the most beautiful weapon in history (despite its failure to detonate). Y2K was automatic and techno-compatible (actually, techno-dependent), chronometrically precise, perfectly counter-Abrahamic, and calendrically creative (re-setting AD 1900 to Year 00). It was staged from the absence of an integrated, malevolent subject, out of simple arithmetic, targeting an exactly

scheduled, consummate fulfillment of millennial expectation through sheer coincidence. The world order was to have been softly terminated, by 'chance'. Nothing that has ever actually happened in history made as much sense as this (which didn't). The more closely it is examined, the more exquisite it appears. Among other missed Doomsdays, none comes close. But as Y2K said, insidiously: Never Mind.

Even the shoddiest of the Old Doomsdays satisfied intellectual appetites that will now hunger forever. First of all, and most basically, they catered to the transcendental impulse, understood as a search for ultimate or enveloping structures and principles of organization. As a metaphysical event, conclusive Apocalypse promises an escape from distracting detail and an apprehension of the frame. Biblical bases for such apprehension are found in Isaiah 34:4 — "All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll." This image is repeated in Revelation 6:14 — "And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together." Apocalyptic time does not add a new sentence, or even a new chapter, to the chronicle of events. It uncovers the limit of the scroll, by exceeding it. For that, however, it has to complete itself.

Secondly, a punctual Apocalypse fulfills a semiotic (and in particular numerical) realism, as expressed — most lucidly — in

occultism and schizophrenia. The apocalyptic exposes a primal encryption of culture, coding the operations of super-human intelligence (God or gods, transcended masters, aliens, time-travelers, spontaneous social order, or bacteria … any will do). A true calendar is revealed, in which semiotic exhaustion, or roll-over, precisely coincides with the end of a real epoch. Hyper-traditionalism thus exoticizes itself in the formulation: travel inwards far enough and you arrive at the outside. It thus provides the most radical challenge to the fundamental mantra of the contemporary human sciences – the (Saussurean) arbitrary nature of the sign.

An additional and essentially modern contribution to the apocalyptic is made by the arithmetic of the intrinsically unsustainable, as defined by Thomas Malthus (1768-1834) in his An Essay on the Principle of Population. The empirical foundations for an inevitable crisis are found in trends to exponential growth and their projected collision with a limit. Variants of such apocalyptic projection are found in Marxism, environmentalism, and Technological Singularity (Karl Marx, M. King Hubbert, and Ray Kurzweil).

Even from this brief survey, it becomes possible to outline certain core features of a model apocalypse: comprehensive, punctual, and climactic. In other words, a transition that cannot

be contained by the pre-existing nature of time, occurring at an exact, cryptically anticipated moment, bringing the central historical process to its culmination. All of that is gathered together in Doomsday, and Doomsday is dead.

Note: Thanks to Mathieu Borysevicz and Sophie Huang of the MAB Society, whose December 10th, 2012, Minsheng Museum event, Just What is it about the end of the world that makes it so appealing? provided the opportunity to discuss the schematics of apocalypse.

Quibbles with Moldbug

JANUARY 24, 2013

To be a reactionary, minimally speaking, requires no more than a recognition that things are going to hell. As the source of decay is traced ever further back, and attributed to ever more deeply-rooted – and securely mainstream — sociopolitical assumptions, the reactionary attitude becomes increasingly extreme. If innovative elements are introduced into either the diagnosis or the proposed remedy, a neo-reactionary mentality is born.

As the United States, along with the world that it has built, careers into calamity, neo-reactionary extremism is embarrassingly close to becoming a vogue. If evidence is needed, consider the Vacate Movement, a rapidly growing dissident faction within the 0.0000001%. This is a development that would have been scarcely imaginable, were it not for the

painstakingly crafted, yet rhetorically effervescent provocations of Mencius Moldbug.

From Moldbug, immoderate neo-reaction has learnt many essential and startling facts about the genealogy and tendency of history's central affliction, newly baptized the Cathedral. It has been liberated from the mesmerism of 'democratic universalism' – or evangelical ultra-puritanism – and trained back towards honest (and thus forbidden) books. It has re-learnt class analysis, of unprecedented explanatory power. Much else could have been added, before arriving at our destination: the schematic outline for a 'neocameral' alternative to the manifestly perishing global political order. (On a trivial etiquette matter: Moldbug politely asks to be addressed as 'Mencius' — comparable requests by Plato Jiggabug and Siddhartha Moldbucket have been evaded too.)

Moldbug scrupulously distances his proposals from any hint of revolutionary agitation, or even the mildest varieties of civil disobedience. Neocameralism is not designed to antagonize, but rather to restore order to social bodies that have squandered it, by drafting a framework compatible with the long-lost art of effective government. ('Long-lost', that is, to the West – the Singapore example, among those of other city states and special economic zones, is never far removed.) Neocameralism would

not overthrow anything, but rather arise amongst ruins. It is a solution awaiting the terminal configuration of a problem.

The neocameral program proceeds roughly as follows:

Phase-1: Constructively disciplined lamentation

Phase-2: Civilization collapses

Phase-3: Re-boot to a modernized form of absolute monarchy, in which citizens are comprehensively stripped of all historically-accumulated political rights

Despite its obvious attractions to partisans of liberty, this program is not without its dubious features, a few of which can be touched upon here whilst rehearsing the Moldbug case for Neocameral government in slightly greater detail. Stated succinctly and preliminarily, our reservations drift into focus when that guy on a white horse appears. Where exactly does he come from?

To answer 'Carlyle' would be easy, and not exactly inaccurate, but it would also miss the structural coherence of the issue. Moldbug refuses to call his neocameral dictator a 'national CEO' (which he is), preferring to describe him as a 'monarch' (which –

as a non-dynastic executive appointee — he isn't), for reasons both stylistic and substantial. Stylistically, royalism is a provocation, and a dramatization of reactionary allegiance. Substantially, it foregrounds the question of sovereignty.

Moldbug's political philosophy is founded upon a revision to the conception of property, sufficient to support the assertion that sovereign power is properly understood as the owner of a country. It is only at this level of political organization that real property rights – i.e. protections – are sustained.

Property is any stable structure of monopoly control. You own something if you alone control it. Your control is stable if no one else will take it away from you. This control may be assured by your own powers of violence, or it may be delegated by a higher power. If the former, it is secondary property. If the latter, it is primary or sovereign property.

The sovereign power (sovereign corporation, or 'sovcorp'), alone, is able to ensure its own property rights. Its might and rights are absolutely identical, and from this primary identity subordinate rights (to 'secondary property') cascade down through the social hierarchy. Neocameralism is nothing but the systematic, institutional recognition of this reality. (Whether it is, in fact, a 'reality' is a question we shall soon proceed to.)

Perhaps surprisingly, Moldbug's conclusions can be presented in terms that recovering libertarians have found appealing:

Neocameralism is the idea that a sovereign state or primary corporation is not organizationally distinct from a secondary or private corporation. Thus we can achieve good management, and thus libertarian government, by converting sovcorps to the same management design that works well in today's private sector – the joint-stock corporation.

One way to approach neocameralism is to see it as a refinement of royalism, an ancient system in which the sovcorp is a sort of family business. Under neocameralism, the biological quirks of royalism are eliminated and the State "goes public," hiring the best executives regardless of their bloodline or even nationality.

Or you can just see neocameralism as part of the usual capitalist pattern in which services are optimized by aligning the interests of the service provider and the service consumer. If this works for groceries, why shouldn't it work for government? I have a hard time in accepting the possibility that democratic constitutionalism would generate either lower prices or better produce at Safeway …

In order to take a step back from this vision, towards its foundations, it is useful to scrutinize its building blocks. When Moldbug defines property as "any stable structure of monopoly control" what is really meant by 'control'? It might seem simple enough. To control something is to use, or make use of it — to put it to work, such that a desired outcome is in fact achieved. 'Property' would be glossed as exclusive right of use, or instrumental utilization, conceived with sufficient breadth to encompass consumption, and perhaps (we will come to this), donation or exchange.

Complications quickly arise. 'Control' in this case would involve technical competence, or the ability to make something work. If control requires that one can use something effectively, then it demands compliance with natural fact (through techno-scientific understanding and practical skills). Even consumption is a type of use. Is this historical variable – vastly distant from intuitive notions of sovereignty – actually suited to a definition of property?

It might be realistic to conceive property through control, and control through technical competence, but it would be hard to defend as an advance in formalism. Since this problem thoroughly infuses the topic of 'might', or operational sovereignty, it is also difficult to isolate, or parenthesize.

Moldbug's frequent, enthusiastic digressions into the practicalities of crypto-locked military apparatuses attest strongly to this. The impression begins to emerge that the very possibility of sovereign property is bound to an irreducibly fuzzy, historically dynamic, and empirically intricate investigation into the micro-mechanics of power, dissolving into an acid fog of Clauswitzean 'friction' (or ineliminable unpredictability).

More promising, by far – for the purposes of tractable argument — is a strictly formal or contractual usage of 'control' to designate the exclusive right to free disposal or commercial alienation. Defined this way, ownership is a legal category, co-original with the idea of contract, referring to those things which one has the right to trade (based on natural law). Property is essentially marketable. It cannot exist unless it can be alienated through negotiation. A prince who cannot trade away his territory does not 'own' it in any sense that matters.

Moldbug seems to acknowledge this, in at least three ways. Firstly, his formalization of sovereign power, through conversion into sovereign stock, commercializes it. Within the neocameral regime, power takes the form of revenue-yielding property, available for free disposal by those who wield it. That is the sole basis for the corporate analogy. If sovereign stock were not freely disposable, its 'owners' would be mere stewards,

subject to obligations, non-alienable political responsibilities, or administrative duties that demonstrate with absolute clarity the subordination to a higher sovereignty. (That is, broadly speaking, the current situation, and inoffensively conventional political theory.)

Secondly, the neocameral state exists within a patchwork, or system of interactions, through which they compete for population, and in which peaceful (or commercial) redistributions — including takeovers and break-ups — are facilitated. Unless sovereign stock can be traded within the patchwork, it is not property at all. This in turn indicates that 'internal' positive legislation, as dictated by the domestic 'sovereign', is embedded within a far more expansive normative system, and the definition of 'property' cannot be exhausted by its local determination within the neocameral micro-polis. As Moldbug repeatedly notes, an introverted despotism that violated broader patchwork norms – such as those governing free exit — could be reliably expected to suffer a collapse of sovereign stock value (which implies that the substance of sovereign stock is systemically, rather than locally, determined). If the entire neocameral state is disciplined through the patchwork, how real can its local sovereignty be? This systemic disciplining or subversion of local sovereignty, it should be noted, is the sole attraction of the neocameral schema to

supporters of dynamic geography (who want nothing more than for the national government to become the patchwork system's bitch).

Thirdly (and relatedly), neocameralism is floated as a model for experimental government, driven cybernetically towards effectiveness by the same types of feedback mechanisms that control 'secondary' corporations. In particular, population traffic between neocameral states is conceived as a fundamental regulator, continuously measuring the functionality of government, and correcting it in the direction of attractiveness. The incentive structure of the neocameral regime – and thus its claim to practical rationality — rests entirely upon this. Once again, however, it is evidently the radical limitation of local sovereignty, rather than its unconstrained expression, which promises to make such governments work. Free exit – to take the single most important instance — is a rule imposed at a higher level than the national sovereign, operating as a natural law of the entire patchwork. Without free exit, a neocameral state is no more than a parochial despotism. The absolute sovereign of the state must choose to comply with a rule he did not legislate … something is coming unstuck here (it's time to send that white horse to the biodiesel tanks).

Neocameralism necessarily commercializes sovereignty, and in doing so it accommodates power to natural law. Sovereign stock ('primary property') and 'secondary property' become commercially inter-changeable, dissolving the original distinction, whilst local sovereignty is rendered compliant with the wider commercial order, and thus becomes a form of constrained 'secondary sovereignty' relative to the primary or absolute sovereignty of the system itself. Final authority bleeds out into the catallactic ensemble, the agora, or commercium, where what can really happen is decided by natural law. It is this to which sovereign stockholders, if they are to be effective, and to prosper, must defer.

The fundamental point, and the reason why the pretender on the white horse is so misleading, is that sovereignty cannot, in principle, inhere in a particular social agent – whether individual, or group. This is best demonstrated in reference to the concept of natural law (which James Donald outlines with unsurpassed brilliance). When properly understood, or articulated, natural law cannot possibly be violated. Putting your hand into a fire, and being burnt, does not defy the natural law that temperatures beyond a certain range cause tissue damage and pain. Similarly, suppressing private property, and producing economic cataclysm, does not defy the natural law that human economic behavior is sensitive to incentives.

Positive law, as created by legislators, takes the form: do (or don't do) this. Violations will be punished.

Natural law, as discovered by any rational being, takes the form: do what thou wilt and accept the consequences. Rewards and punishments are intrinsic to it. It cannot be defied, but only misunderstood. It is therefore absolutely sovereign (Deus sive Natura). Like any other being, governments, however powerful, can only comply with it, either through intelligent adaptation and flourishing, or through ignorance, incompetence, degeneration, and death. To God-or-Nature it matters not at all. Natural law is indistinguishable from the true sovereign power which really decides what can work, and what doesn't, which can then – 'secondarily' — be learnt by rational beings, or not.

Moldbug knows this – really. He demonstrates it – to take just one highly informative example — through his insistence that a neocameral state would tend to tax at the Laffer optimum. That is to say, such a state would prove its effectiveness by maximizing the return on sovereign property in compliance with reality. It does not legislate the Laffer curve, or choose for it to exist, but instead recognizes that it has been discovered, and with it an aspect of natural law. Anything less, or other, would be inconsistent with its legitimacy as a competent protector of

property. To survive, prosper, and even pretend to sovereignty, it can do nothing else. Its power is delegated by commercium.

It is surely no coincidence that Cnut the Great has been described by Norman Cantor as "the most effective king in Anglo-Saxon history." As Wikipedia relates his story:

His accession to the Danish throne in 1018 brought the crowns of England and Denmark together. Cnut held this power-base together by uniting Danes and Englishmen under cultural bonds of wealth and custom, rather than sheer brutality.

Most importantly:

Henry of Huntingdon, the 12th-century chronicler, tells how Cnut set his throne by the sea shore and commanded the tide to halt and not wet his feet and robes. Yet "continuing to rise as usual [the tide] dashed over his feet and legs without respect to his royal person. Then the king leapt backwards, saying: 'Let all men know how empty and worthless is the power of kings, for there is none worthy of the name, but He whom heaven, earth, and sea obey by eternal laws.'"

A Republic, If You Can Keep It

FEBRUARY 1, 2013

The interlocking achievements of Kurt Gödel, which revolutionized the rigorous understanding of logic, arithmetic, and time, are not of a nature that wins ready popular acclamation. There is nevertheless a broadly factual story about him that has attained some notable level of popularity, and it is one that connects suggestively with the core concerns of his work. At the website of the Institute for Advanced Study (where Gödel was based from 1940 until his death in 1978), Oskar Morgenstern's recollection of the episode in question is recorded:

[Gödel] rather excitedly told me that in looking at the Constitution, to his distress, he had found some inner contradictions and that he could show how in a perfectly legal

manner it would be possible for somebody to become a dictator and set up a Fascist regime never intended by those who drew up the Constitution. I told him that it was most unlikely that such events would ever occur, even assuming that he was right, which of course I doubted.

But he was persistent and so we had many talks about this particular point. I tried to persuade him that he should avoid bringing up such matters at the examination before the court in Trenton, and I also told Einstein about it: he was horrified that such an idea had occurred to Gödel, and he also told him he should not worry about these things nor discuss that matter.

Many months went by and finally the date for the examination in Trenton came. On that particular day, I picked up Gödel in my car. He sat in the back and then we went to pick up Einstein at his house on Mercer Street, and from there we drove to Trenton. While we were driving, Einstein turned around a little and said, "Now Gödel, are you really well prepared for this examination?" Of course, this remark upset Gödel tremendously, which was exactly what Einstein intended and he was greatly amused when he saw the worry on Gödel's face.

When we came to Trenton, we were ushered into a big room, and while normally the witnesses are questioned separately from

the candidate, because of Einstein's appearance, an exception was made and all three of us were invited to sit down together, Gödel, in the center. The examiner first asked Einstein and then me whether we thought Gödel would make a good citizen. We assured him that this would certainly be the case, that he was a distinguished man, etc.

And then he turned to Gödel and said, Now, Mr. Gödel, where do you come from?

Gödel: Where I come from? Austria.

The examiner: What kind of government did you have in Austria?

Gödel: It was a republic, but the constitution was such that it finally was changed into a dictatorship.

The examiner: Oh! This is very bad. This could not happen in this country.

Gödel: Oh, yes, I can prove it.

To the great advantage of intelligence on earth, Gödel did not in the end disqualify himself from residence in the USA through

this disastrously over-accurate understanding of its constitution. Evidently, despite everything that had happened by 1947, detailed attachment to the constitution had not yet become a thought-crime.

Today, emphatic attachment to the US Constitution is restricted to the decent i.e. lunatic fringe of the Outer Party, and even crankier outliers. Hardcore libertarians tend to dismiss it as a distraction, if not a malign incarnation of statist degeneracy (when compared to the less Leviathan-compatible Articles of Confederation). Reactionary realists of the Moldbug school (in all their vast multitudes) are at least as dismissive, seeing it as little more than a fetish object and evasion of the timeless practical question: Quis custodiet ipsos custodes? If constitutions are realistically indefensible, both in principle and as a matter of brutally demonstrated historical fact, what significance could they have to any cold-eyed analysis of power?

Since the overwhelmingly bulk of present USG activity is transparently unconstitutional, the skeptical case largely makes itself. Presidents mobilize congressional support to appoint Supreme Court justices whose principal qualification for office is willingness to conspire in the subversion of the constitution, to the deafening applause of a pork-ravening electorate and their

intermediary lobbies. How could that plausibly be resisted? Perhaps that was Gödel's point.

In fact, no one really knows what Gödel's point was. Jeffrey Kegler, who has examined the topic carefully, leaves it open. "Apparently, the 'inconsistency' noted by Gödel is simply that the Constitution provides for its own amendment," suggests a "gravely disappointed" Mark Dominus, who "had been hoping for something brilliant and subtle that only Gödel would have noticed." Dominus draws this tentative conclusion from Peter Suber's Paradox of Self-Amendment, where it is stated more boldly:

Kurt Gödel the Austrian logician understood that an omnipotent AC contained the risk of tyranny. Gödel studied the U.S. constitution in preparation for his oral citizenship examination in 1948. He noticed that the AC had procedural limitations but no substantive limitations; hence it could be used to overturn the democratic institutions described in the rest of the constitution.

Suber adds: "A desire to limit the amending power, or to make it more difficult — not the same thing — shows a distrust for democracy or a denial that in general the people deserve what they get." (We'll get back to that later.)

This is conceptually persuasive, because it harmonizes Gödel's constitutional concerns with his central intellectual pre-occupation: the emergence of inconsistencies within self-referential formal systems. The Amending Clause (Article V, section 1) is the occasion for the constitution to talk about itself, and thus to encounter problems rigorously comparable to those familiar from Gödel's incompleteness theorems in mathematical logic. Despite the neatness of this 'solution', however, there is no solid evidence to support it. Furthermore, self-referential structures can be identified at numerous other points. For instance, is not the authority of the Supreme Court respecting constitutional interpretation a similar point of reflexivity, with unlimited potential for circularity and paradox? This insight, highly-regarded among the neo-reactionaries, recognizes that the constitution allows – in principle – for a sufficiently corrupted Supreme Court to 'interpret' its way to absolute power (in conformity with a constitution that has sublimed into pure 'life'). Insofar as a constitution allows for its own processing, it must – ultimately — allow anything.

Moldbug asks us to accelerate through this formal tangle, cutting the Gordian knot. "Sovereignty is conserved," he repeats, insistently, so the occasions when power undertakes to bind itself are essentially risible. Of course the final custodian of the

constitution is a constitutionally unrestrained dictator. That's simple Schmittian sanity.

With all due contempt for argumentum ad hominem, it can probably still be agreed that Gödel was not a fool, so that his excited identification of a localized flaw in the US Constitution merits consideration as just that (rather than an excuse to bin the entire problematic). The formal resonances between his topically disparate arguments provide a further incentive to slow down.

Whether in number theory, or space-time cosmology, Gödel's method was to advance the formalization of the system under consideration and then test it to destruction upon the 'strange loops' it generated (paradoxes of self-reference and time-travel). In each case, the system was shown to permit cases that it could not consistently absorb, opening it to an interminable process of revision, or technical improvement. It thus defined dynamic intelligence, or the logic of evolutionary imperfection, with an adequacy that was both sufficient and necessarily inconclusive. What it did not do was trash the very possibility of arithmetic, mathematical logic, or cosmic history — except insofar as these were falsely identified with idols of finality or closure.

On the slender evidence available, Gödel's 'reading' of the US Constitution was strictly analogous. Far from excusing the

abandonment of constitutionalism, it identified constitutional design as the only intellectually serious response to the problem of politics (i.e. untrammeled power). It is a subtle logical necessity that constitutions, like any formal systems of comparable complexity, cannot be perfected or consistently completed. In other words, as Benjamin Franklyn fully recognized, any republic is precarious. Nothing necessarily follows from this, but a number of things might.

Most abruptly, one might contemplate the sickly child with sadness, before abandoning it on the hillside for the wolves. Almost every interesting voice on the right seems to be heading this way. Constitutions are a grim joke.

Alternatively, constitutionalism could be elevated to a new level of cultural dignity, in keeping with its status as the sole model of republican government, or truly logical politics. This would require, first of all, that the necessity for constitutional modification was recognized only when such modification made the constitution stronger, in purely formal, or systemic terms. In the US case, the first indication of such an approach would be an amendment of Article Five itself, in order to specify that constitutional amendments are tolerated only when they satisfy criteria of formal improvement, legitimated in exact, mathematical terms, in accordance with standards of proof no

different than those applicable to absolutely uncontroversial arguments (theorems). Constitutional design would be subsumed within applied mathematics as a subsection of nonlinear control theory.

Under these (unlikely) circumstances, the purpose of the constitution is to sustain itself, and thus the Republic. As a mathematical object, the constitution is maximally simple, consistent, necessarily incomplete, and interpretable as a model of natural law. Political authority is allocated solely to serve the constitution. There are no authorities which are not overseen, within nonlinear structures. Constitutional language is formally constructed to eliminate all ambiguity and to be processed algorithmically. Democratic elements, along with official discretion, and legal judgment, is incorporated reluctantly, minimized in principle, and gradually eliminated through incremental formal improvement. Argument defers to mathematical expertise. Politics is a disease that the constitution is designed to cure.

Extreme skepticism is to be anticipated not only from the Moldbuggian royalists, but from all of those educated by Public Choice theory to analyze 'politics without romance'. How could defending the constitution become an absolute, categorical or unconditional imperative, when the only feasible defenders are

people, guided by multiple incentives, few of which align neatly with objective constitutional order? Yet, how is this different from the question of mathematical or natural scientific progress? Are not mathematicians equally people, with appetites, egos, sex-driven status motivations, and deeply defective capabilities for realistic introspection? How does maths advance? (No one can seriously deny that it does.) The answer surely lies in its autonomous or impersonal criteria of excellence, combined with pluralistic institutions that facilitate Darwinian convergence. The Gödelian equivalence between mathematical logic and constitutional government indicates that such principles and mechanisms are absent from the public domain only due to defective (democratic-bureaucratic) design.

When it comes to deep realism, and to guns, is there any reason to think the military is resistant by nature to constitutional subordination? Between the sublime office of Commander in Chief, and the mere man, is it not obvious that authority should tend to gravitate to the former? It might be argued that civilization is nothing else, that is to say: the tendency of personal authority to decline towards zero. Ape-men will reject this of course. It's what they do.

Between democracy, monarchy, anarchy, or republican government, the arguments will not end soon. They are truly

ancient, and illustrated in the Odyssey, by the strategy of binding oneself against the call of the Sirens. Can Odysseus bind himself? Only republicans defend the attempt, as Gödel did. All of the others let the Sirens win. Perhaps they will.

Twisted Times (Part 1)

FEBRUARY 17, 2013

Abe: "You should go to China."

Joe: "I'm going to France."

Abe: "I'm from the future. You should go to China."
— Looper

In Rian Johnson's Looper (2012), the city of Shanghai reaches back across 30 years to draw people in. Over these decades it feeds itself based on what it is to become: the city of the future. When compared to this, everything else that happens in the movie is mere distraction, but we won't get there for a while.

Strangely enough, 'everything else' was to have been simply everything. Joe was going to Paris, and Shanghai wasn't even in the picture. That was before Chinese authorities told Johnson that they would cover the cost of the Shanghai shoot, making the film a co-production, with convenient access to the Chinese cinema market. The Old World stood no chance.

For American audiences, Looper played into the trend of opinion, through its contrasting urban visions of a grim, deteriorated, crime-wracked Kansas City and the splendors of a 'futuristic' Shanghai. The movie doesn't answer the question: How did America lose the future? It nevertheless accepts the premise, as something close to a pre-installed fact.

Yet if Looper confirmed the direction of American popular attitudes, it marked a shift on the Chinese side. Only a few years before, Western media reported with amusement that the Chinese broadcast authorities had banned time-travel fictions from the nation's airwaves, apparently concerned that the country's citizens were defecting into a pre-republican past, under the influence of narratives that "casually make up myths, have monstrous and weird plots, use absurd tactics, and even promote feudalism, superstition, fatalism and reincarnation." Now a time-travel story was being actively recruited to close an urban promotion loop, linking Shanghai's international image to

a portrayal of retro-chronic anomaly. The Shanghai time-travel industry had arrived.

Before proceeding to a multi-installment investigation of Topological Meta-History tangled time-circuitry, which 'time-travel' illustrates only as a crude dramatization, it is worth pausing over Looper's 'monstrous and weird plot'. Time-travel has a uniquely intimate, and seductively morbid, relationship to both fiction and history, because it scrambles the very principle of narrative order in profundity. If Western media authorities assumed the same role of cultural custodianship that has been traditional among their Chinese peers, they too might have been compelled to denounce a genre that flagrantly subverted the foundational principle of Aristotelian poetics: that any story worthy of veneration should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. If time-travel can occur, it seems (at least initially) that order is an illusion, so that fiction and reality switch places.

From a conservative perspective, therefore, comfort is to be found in the blatant absurdity of time-travel stories (insofar as this can be confined to a reductio ad absurdam of the time-loop structure itself, rather than spreading outwards as the index of primordial cosmic disorder). In this respect, Looper is a model of tranquillization.

The Looper time-travel procedure is monopolized by a criminal syndicate, which utilizes it exclusively for one purpose: the disposal of awkward individuals, who are returned 30 years in time to be murdered, execution-style, by professional killers (yes: "This sounds pretty stupid"). The exorbitant absurdity of this scenario might exempt it from further critical attention, were it not the symptom of more interesting things, and the doorway onto others.

The symptom first: Non-linear time-structures are shaken to pieces almost immediately, once they allow for the transportation of stuff backwards in time. Looper economics exposes this with particular clarity. The killers of 2044 are paid in bars of silver for 'ordinary' hits, and in gold for 'closing loops' or executing their retro-deposited older selves. The bars are sent back from 2074, and circulated through an internal exchange operation, which swaps bullion for (Chinese) paper currency. Whilst this crude time-circuit is presented as a payments system, the process described actually functions as an under-performing money-making machine. By using it, one realizes the ultimate Austrian economic nightmare by printing precious metals, because an ingot sent backwards in time is doubled, or added to its 'previous' instance (which already exists in the past). Mechanical re-iteration of the process would guarantee exponential growth for free. We're not told what the 2074

criminal organization sees as its core business, but it must be seriously lucrative — exciting enough, in any case, to distract them from the fact that their murder-fodder machine is really a bullion fast-breeder. They could have shoveled it full of diamonds, doubling their fortune each 'time', but they decided instead to duplicate human nuisances in 2044. The movie asks us quietly to suspend our impertinent disbelief, and trust that they know what they're doing.

Mike Dickison's excellent Looper commentary succinctly describes this implicit procedure for unlimited wealth, among other incredibly missed opportunities. It surely has to count as a criticism of the movie that its rickety framework of plot coherence is dependent upon the imbecility of its significant agents, who stumble blindly past the prospect of total power in their ruthless pursuit of a miserable racket. This absurdity, as already noted, serves a conservative purpose: The potential of the loop has to be suppressed to sustain narrative drama and intelligibility. The basic flaw of the movie is that far too much was given, before most of it was clumsily taken away.

In the absence of controlling censors, Johnson's story represses itself, messily, comically, and unconvincingly. "This time travel crap, just fries your brain like a egg," the elder Joe (Bruce Willis) confesses on Johnson's behalf. Unleashed time-travel is an anti-

plot, inconsistent with dramatic presentation. (If you're not willing to take Aristotle's word for that, watching Primer a few dozen times should sort you out.) Narrative wreckage is what time-travel does.

Time-travel absurdity is a choice. It is a decision taken, at least semi-deliberately, for conservative or protective reasons, because the alternative would be ruin. Even the representation of (radically nonlinear) time anomaly by 'time-travel' is indicative of this, since it is programmed by the preservation of a narrative function (the 'time-traveler'), regardless of conceptual expense. Far rather the incoherent jumble of matter duplication, time-line proliferation, immunized strands of personal memory, and the arbitrary inhibition of potentialities, than utter narrative disorder, fate loops, the annihilation of agency, and the emergence of an alien consistency, subverting all historical meaning.

If the mask of time-travel has slipped enough to expose some hint of the intolerable tangle beneath, we're ready to take the next step …

(This will help.)

From the previous post on, Land has gone into other venues. Outside In's first post dates from February 17, 2013. Urban Future 1.*2* established itself on WordPress on July 29, 2013